Out of the Darkness: A Jinchuuriki's Tale

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People have asked for a sequel with Riley from There's Always A Way... So I got to wondering what someone with his sarcastic personality would be like in Naruto. Warning: This is darker and grittier.

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A Harrowing Escape

The main lesson I've learned out of all of this is to not pay much attention to rumors. Damn things will get you killed.

I suppose the start of this story lies in that night, over twelve years ago, when the Nine-Tailed Fox decided to practice 'Urban Renewal no Jutsu' on the lovely village of Konoha. I wasn't there, of course, but the stories say that the Fourth Hokage invented a new technique, an incredibly powerful jutsu that utterly destroyed the Kyuubi.

Show off.

Of course, you can imagine that the other hidden villages became *intensely* interested in the means by which such a feat was accomplished. After expending sufficient resources (i.e. buying the local drunks some sake), they discovered what really happened. Instead of destroying the demon, the Fourth Hokage was forced to seal the demon away, inside a newborn baby. The child would, over time, absorb the demon's chakra, neutralizing it, and would be known as the hero of the village for finally vanquishing the demon. Rah, rah, rah.

It also meant that this child would have the potential to become an incredibly powerful shinobi… perhaps an instrument of destruction only slightly less powerful than the Kyuubi itself. Pleasant thought, eh?

Well, it was pretty unpleasant for the other great ninja nations, especially the ones that were not too friendly with Konoha. When spies reported that the Hidden Village of Sand, Sunakagure, had duplicated this feat, they became even more nervous. There were only so many of the Biju still roaming around, and not all of them were easily located.

Pretty soon there was a race on. Nobody knew how powerful these 'Jinchuuriki' could be, but nobody wanted to be caught without one if the answer was "very".

Iwakagure, the 'Village Hidden among the Rocks' was no exception to this. The Tsuchikage was an ambitious bastard, and he wasn't about to let Konoha or Suna hold any advantage over him. It didn't take long before his spies were able to uncover the general means by which the Biju were bound.

His first attempt was a less than stellar success. Luring Hachimata, the eight-tailed dragon, down out of the mountains was the easy part, even though it did eventually cost him thirty shinobi. Either the lives of his men meant little to him, or the Iwa ninja sucked so badly that he wouldn't miss them much.

But binding such a beast into a seal was another matter entirely.

He knew he needed an expert on seals to enact the rite, so his agents turned the Land of Earth upside down and shook it. Hard. What they found was an itinerant monk who had an encyclopedic knowledge of chakra manipulations, not to mention being pretty spry for an old geezer. Of course, the Tsuchikage had his own 'special requirements' for the ritual. He wanted elements added to the seal that would make this weapon easily controlled. It might make the child little more than an emotionless automaton, but what did he care?

Now, if you're wondering if I'm portraying the illustrious Tsuchikage, leader of Iwakagure, the most powerful ninja in all of the Land of Earth, a man who made his enemies quake in their boots… blah, blah, blah, and so on as a ruthless, treacherous bastard, well… you'd be right. Before his rise to power, there were several small independent shinobi clans that coexisted with Iwakagure in the Land of Earth. Within ten years of his ascension, they were no more. Their members all disappeared, and their techniques 'mysteriously' appeared within the Tsuchikage's libraries.

Now, as you can imagine, exterminating a ninja clan down to the very last member is easier said than done. At least one of those ninjas, an expert on seals and ofuda, saw the 'writing on the wall' (forgive the pun) before it was his turn and decided on a career change. Shortly thereafter, the Land of Earth had one less ninja… and one more monk.

Now, this 'monk' was an honest cuss, as honest as only people who have nothing left to lose can be, and he eventually admitted to me that he originally planned to make the seal as ordered… only with a few intentional, minute imperfections. Hachimata would be able to break free within a few weeks or months – right in the middle of the Tsuchikage's fortress within Iwakagure.

The only problem with this plan was the old man going soft at the last moment. He didn't have a problem with the sacrifice initially powering the seal – that was a pair of Rock Jonins who knew too much. The Tsuchikage could kill all of those he wanted. But the vessel of the binding was, by necessity, a helpless newborn plucked from a brothel. And that was where his remaining scruples intervened.

When the sealing was completed, the Tsuchikage immediately knew something was wrong. The mind-control elements were obviously not present when he examined the seal. His jonins seized the old man, and one of them recognized the missing ninja they had sought so long ago. At this point, the old man laughed and pointed out a few "truths" before the Tsuchikage could do anything rash.

The old man told the furious kage that no, the seal did not include the requested mind-controlling elements. If he'd been stupid enough to do as the man wanted, the demon within the seal could also use those elements to seize control of the host. Furthermore, if he tried to dispose of the babe, the moment of its death would mark the release of Hachimata. And once bound by such a seal, it was impossible to use the same one again, so the dragon would therefore be unstoppable. Old man was pretty good at lying through his teeth.

Enraged and humiliated by this betrayal, the Tsuchikage had both the old man and the infant consigned to the chakra-shielded cells in the deepest dungeon beneath his fortress. At first they were held while the Tsuchikage tried to think of a way out of his dilemma. No matter where the child was murdered, the demon would *know* where it had been sealed. It would likely return to that location to seek vengeance. The 'monk' was kept alive in case his blood or chakra was needed for a second ritual that might resolve their problems.

The absolute master of Iwakagure was still struggling with this dilemma, and was about to risk calling the old monk's bluff, when his jailors made their weekly report. One casual statement caught both his ear and his inspiration. The guards mentioned how the old man was taking care of the child and the ruthless leader's eyes lit up. They would allow this interaction to continue, so as the child grew up it would become attached to the old monk. Then the Jinchuuriki would do their bidding to keep the old man safe and secure. They would still have the services of Hachimata for the inevitable war with Konoha.

The Tsuchikage was so pleased with this plan that he managed to go three whole years without bragging about it to the old man who thought he'd deceived the "greatest" of the kages.

Of course, I know about this because I'm the one that grew up in an underground prison cell with a weird tattoo on my stomach and a crotchety old man telling me what to do. This seemed pretty normal to me, but the old man liked to drop hints about how I came to be… and, I think, to awaken a desire within me to see the outside world. It wasn't until a lot later that I realized he meant, 'without him'.

My earliest memories are sitting at the old bastard's feet, listening to him tell stories and scratch himself. Hygiene was a little hard to come by down there, and it was a good thing I was an extremely healthy baby. Otherwise, I might not have made it. Of course, with what I know now, I realize why I didn't get sick nearly as often as I should have. Even living in that dank hole.

Anyway, the old man loved to talk, so I just listened a lot. After a while I began to talk back. He didn't like that at first, but gradually I began to ask better and better questions. I'll give the crusty old bastard this – he never talked down to me or used baby-talk like I see some people use. What the hell is the purpose of that, anyway?

But mostly he talked, and I listened. I would get up and walk around when I got stiff, and he would correct my posture and the way I walked. The special maximum-security cell wasn't large, but it did at least have enough room to move around. I suppose I wouldn't have been much use as a weapon if I couldn't even walk.

As the years passed and I gradually grew taller, the old man focused my overabundant energy into special kinds of movement. I was halfway through my first kata before he explained what Taijutsu was. The idea of combat kind of threw me at first. Who could I fight down here, except for him? But when you're young and there's nothing else to do, you stop asking questions after a while.

I suppose, in one sense of the word, I've had little to no formal training. But in reality, I've trained every day of my life from the day I first walked to the evening I saw my first sunset.

This isn't to suggest that the Rock shinobi left us completely alone. Every so often the old man would dump our food into the waste pot as soon as it was delivered. Other times he would begin breathing very shallowly, and hold his hand over my mouth and nose as well. His hand would feel funny, making my face itch where the skin touched, until he let me go. It wasn't until much later that I realized he'd detected drugs or poisons in our food, or even the air itself. Canny old bastard.

When I grew tired of moving, the stories continued. The old man told tales of his youth, and his life as a shinobi. I'd acquired a very narrow perspective on life in this mythical 'outside' he kept going on about, but becoming a shinobi sounded like something interesting to do. So, I began asking for more and more details on how they did things. He seemed encouraged by this, and sometimes even got up from his

bench to demonstrate things… though this happened less and less often as the years passed.

Though my lessons were primarily oral, he also insisted that I learn to read and write. Let me assure you that you pay a lot more attention to your brushwork (actually a lock of torn-off hair and a flat piece of floor) when the only pigment available is your own blood. Fortunately, I could nick a finger with a sharp edge of stone and it would heal up almost before I was done. I noticed the old man avidly watching this one day and asked him why. He wouldn't answer though, and said he would explain more some day. As the years passed, he began to teach me about special kinds of writing, and he taught me more about seals and sealing techniques than I thought it was possible to know.

This continued until a few months ago. He taught, I learned, and I would have been content to do so forever… until the old man acquired a ragged cough that wouldn't go away. I knew something was wrong, because the pace of our lessons abruptly increased. He'd begun showing me some basic chakra control exercises, and I enjoyed hanging from the ceiling by my feet to show off. He insisted, though, that I never do this when one of the other people was around. He called them guards, but I thought of them almost as servants. They brought us food and water, and carried away the waste pot… what else could they be? But I also noticed that he breathed very shallowly while they were around, and thus almost never coughed. Later I would realize that he didn't want them to know he was ill.

I grew uneasy as the lessons quickened in pace. He spoke faster, sometimes stumbling over his words until he broke down in a coughing frenzy. At the same time, the fascinating things I was learning were a clever distraction from my worries.

Finally, I awoke half-way through our sleeping period, sensing something was wrong. The old man's breathing was harsh, and labored. His complexion was pale, the lips colored with a bluish tinge. He gestured for me to come closer, and in a halting whisper,

he told me *all* the remaining details of how I came to be. He said that he would be dying soon, and wished to apologize for my life thus far. I didn't even really understand what he was saying, but he was so agitated that I forgave him on the spot, for whatever he might have done. He smiled, and the years seemed to fall off of his face for a moment as his claw-like hand tightened on my forearm. Then he went into another spasm of coughing that left his cracked lips red with blood.

"I've told you everything I could think of, taught you everything I know," he whispered, "When I'm gone, I want you to sit there like you are meditating, but with your eyes wide open. Don't respond to them, no matter what they say or do, until they open the door to take my body out of here. Then, I want you to run. Run your ass off, boy! Don't ever let them catch you and put you in a cage again. Get away from this shit pile of a village and leave Earth Country far behind you."

"Where will I go?" I asked, my mind shuddering back from the idea of him dying and me leaving. This was our home!

"In Konoha, there is another like you, one that helped save their village when they bound the Kyuubi. He shows that a Jinchuuriki can be a hero. Go there, to the Land of Fire, and you'll get far better treatment than you ever will here." Then the old man's haggard face grew fierce again. "Let the Tsuchikage's weapon leave and join with his enemies. Live well, boy, that's the best revenge!"

And then he was seized with another coughing fit that left him unconscious when it was done. His breathing grew slower and slower and then finally stopped.

It wasn't hard for me to don a wide-eyed stare as I suddenly felt alone, for the first time in my life. The guard who brought our food called out to the old man, and then swore when he didn't respond. He tried to get my attention in a softer voice, but I did not move. It was almost an hour later that a group of six men arrived, more than I had ever seen before. I felt my pulse quicken as I realized they *did*

intend to actually open the door. What they needed to do could not be done with the small sliding panel.

Sure enough, a large metallic key was produced, with no small flourish. It was an eternity after it was fitted into the lock that a loud clank was emitted from the door. With a spray of fine red dust, the door to our cell opened for the first time in my memory. I almost lost control of my face, which would have been disastrous, when the blood began to pound through my veins. My muscles began to tremble and I was suddenly bursting with energy. The chakra suppression field on the cell must have been disengaged. The old man had explained the theory behind it, but I'd never felt the difference it made.

I surged to my feet and charged forward in one motion. I ran between the guards for the most part, nudging a couple off-balance. They were so shocked that I was out in the hallway before any of them even shouted.

I ran up the stairs, feeling my legs stretch at the unaccustomed motions. The old man guessed we were at least five levels underground, so I didn't begin checking doors until after the fifth landing.

Finally, I heard the sounds of pursuit approaching, so I slipped through a door into a darkened hallway. I padded over the absurdly soft floor mats, my calloused feet making no sounds. Since I was only wearing a filthy pair of pants at the time, I had no chance of blending in with the guards or anyone else. My only chance lay in a rapid escape. The rapid footfalls echoing up the stairs drew closer, so I pushed against the closest doorway.

Nothing happened.

It took a frustrated moment for me to realize the door actually slid to one side, but I didn't waste time cursing. Slipping through, I found myself in another hallway. There was a window halfway down the right-hand wall, and I stared out of it in wonder.

It's pretty useless to describe what looking at the sky for the first time was like, not for someone who has come to take it for granted. So I won't. Let's just say I lost track of a couple of moments as my brain rearranged itself. The window was sealed shut, so I drew back my fist and prepared to shatter it.

A strange sound reached my ears and I hesitated. It wasn't a particularly smart thing to do, and I've wondered how things might have been different if I'd been able to control my curiosity.

As I said though, I was disoriented and behaving rather stupidly, so I followed my ears to the opposite doorway. It slid open and I saw a young person that I guessed was a girl.

She looked a year or two younger than me, though she was even smaller in stature, with short red hair and bright green eyes. She was dressed in a yellow tunic and leggings. The green of her eyes, however, was heavily veined with red, and it was obvious she'd been crying. I was no expert on the 'softer' emotions, but even I could tell she was upset. Even discounting from her coloration, there was something very odd about this girl.

I, on the other hand, was terrified. If she cried out, the guards would find me in seconds. I was still pretty buzzed from being out of the chakra suppression field, so when I jumped backwards, the seal on my stomach glowed green for a second.

The girl's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. But instead of screaming, she said, in a wondering whisper, "You've got one just like me."

I didn't think anything else could knock me off balance that day, but I was wrong. Rooted to the floor, I stared as she modestly raised the hem of her tunic and screwed her eyes shut. The skin on her stomach was pale, though not as pale as mine. The orangish-red lines of her seal stood out in dark contrast as they flared into visibility, wavered, and then disappeared.

Loud footsteps echoed, coming from the hall I'd just left. My head snapped toward the window, but the girl silently took my hand. "You want to get out?" she whispered.

I nodded urgently and she pulled me into the room. I quietly closed the door behind me as she cracked another door and carefully peered into another room. "This is my secret room," she explained, her voice just as quiet. "Follow me."

She led me through more twists and turns than I could keep track of. But true to her word, we were soon slipping out of a servant's entrance and into a back alley. I glanced up at the towering building we had just exited, the monument to the Tsuchikage's ego, and my home for the last decade or so. I said goodbye to the old man and prepared to fulfill his last command.

But the girl didn't let go of my hand. "Take me with you," she said, a crease forming between her eyebrows as she frowned.

"I have to run away…" I started to explain, but then stopped. There really wasn't time.

"I know," she said. "I overheard them talking. I… I'm not really his daughter, I'm just a tool to them, some… *thing* they're raising to be loyal. My whole life is one big fat lie! I don't want to ever see them again!" Her last words came out in a hiss, and for a second I thought the sun was reflected in her eyes. Then I knew better.

"All right," I agreed, wondering if I would regret this later. "But it's going to be dangerous, and we have to move fast."

"I bet I can run faster than you," she challenged.

"We'll see," I said as I took off down the alleyway.

We tried to stay out of sight at first, but we weren't really dressed or equipped for stealth. We were halfway around the marketplace

before someone spotted us. In seconds a cry went up and the two of us ran like the wind.

Our pursuers were only slowly gaining on us. The shinobi were bigger, and maybe a little faster, but we were smaller and more maneuverable. And probably better motivated. The girl proved true to her words and I wondered if we might actually be able to make it when disaster struck.

Bad luck and our last turn led us into a dead end. The pursuit was right behind us, so I only had a moment to shove the girl behind a pile of crates before I leaped to the top of a wall so I could start running across the rooftops.

Of course, we'd stayed on the street level for a reason. No sooner had I cleared the awnings and debris than a pair of bolos flew through the air and wrapped around my arms and legs. I fell to the rooftop, rolled off, and landed hard on the pavement. To my dismay, I ended up not too far from the girl's hiding place, but there was nothing I could do about that, other than hope she kept her mouth shut. Better at least one of us got away from those assholes.

Anyway, the Tsuchikage's men didn't appreciate the exercise we'd given them, and they let me know with their hands, feet, and assorted sharp implements. I was a bloody mess by the time they were done with me, and I could do little more than twitch and bleed as they lifted me by my feet and dragged me off.

On the plus side, the girl hadn't lost her nerve, and was still hidden… though I thought I heard her gasp once when my arm was cut open. With the eye that wasn't swollen shut, I glared up at the five shinobi that dragged me through the streets. What was up with those stupid one-sleeved uniforms, anyway? Old man was right, they were a bunch of losers. I could have sworn there were six of them when they were beating on me, but my memory was a little fuzzy.

Anyway, the fashion victims soon grew tired of dragging me, and I was far too filthy for them to want to carry, so they decided to kill the

"pasty-skinned freak" on the spot and let the villagers clean up the mess. The passers-by didn't say a word during this discussion; they just looked away or stared through us like we weren't even there. They were deciding who would get the honor when a messenger showed up with orders. Underneath the steadily-decreasing pain, I was vaguely amused when they learned I was to be *captured* , not killed. A member of the Tsuchikage's household had gone missing as well, and she was to be returned unharmed at all costs. I wondered if they hoped I knew something about her whereabouts, or if they were actually demented enough to believe I'd ever serve them.

My time sense was a little out of whack, but I slowly began to realize that I was hurting a *lot* less than I was earlier. While the Rock Shinobi argued about whose fault it was that they'd disobeyed orders, I was slowly loosening the cord around my arms – the one around my knees was removed when they took me for a drag,

"Where's Tetsuo?" one of the shinobi abruptly asked, looking around.

"I don't know," another one answered. "Lazy bastard didn't even help us drag this piece of shit."

"Idiot!" the first one said, slapping the other on the head. "We're supposed to be looking for a *little girl* ."

"Shit!" more than one voice hissed.

The blatant fear in that expletive made my blood run cold as four of the five Shinobi took off running back the way we'd come. Had this Tetsuo creep heard her or something?

The remaining ninja guarding me looked a little sick and I felt my stomach tighten as well. I was still covered with blood, but aside from a little stiffness, I didn't hurt that much. Minutes seemed like hours, but the bolo cord was almost untied behind me when a loud explosion made everyone look up.

Screams erupted as a brilliant ball of fire rose over the marketplace. Eyes wide, my guard stared at it, facing the same direction as his companions had gone. The bolo cord was around his throat, and my knee was pressed into the small of his back before he even realized I was moving. The fleeing shopkeepers didn't try to stop me. In fact, they gave me a wide berth as I hauled back on the bolo, chakra burning in my aching muscles, until I felt the shinobi's trachea collapse.

As I eased the body to the ground, I broke the neck with a sharp twist, just to be sure. Then I took off running in the opposite direction as the panicked civilians – toward the growing fire.

There were muffled bangs as more flammable wares exploded, but nothing to equal that first eruption. I began dodging burning embers and detouring around flaming wreckage as I grew closer to the alleyway where I'd been caught. I felt sick about the little girl, and hoped she was all right. Even though she'd fairly demanded that I take her with me, it was at least partially my fault if she was hurt.

The fire was moving towards me as I approached ground zero, so I had to detour onto the roof of a stone warehouse to get past the flames. The clay roof tiles were nearly hot enough to raise blisters, and I wondered how far the fire would spread. Then I shook my head. Not my problem.

The alleyway was redolent with the sickly-sweet smell of burnt flesh. Five charred skeletons smoked on the scorched stones. The crates, bundles, and junk were all gone, reduced to a fine spray of ashes that settled in my greasy hair and coated my throat.

I winced as my feet sizzled on the hot stones. The pain numbed almost as soon as it started, and I felt the chakra around my seal circulate even faster. The cooking smell grew stronger and I was afraid to look down.

My eyes were drawn to the sole inhabitant of the alleyway. The girl stood there, her clothes gone… burned away or something. Her

eyes were closed and she was shuddering so hard she could barely stand. The seal on her stomach glowed like it was made of live coals, but it was the livid bruises on her skin that made me feel sick to my stomach.

Her eyes snapped open as I approached, and I braced myself to be incinerated. An angry orange glow had replaced the brilliant green, but then it winked out. She staggered forward and I barely caught her before she hit the ground. "You're all bloody," she whispered.

I just grunted, not trusting my voice. I picked her up and was amazed at how light she was. Moving across the rooftops and using the smoke and confusion from the fire, we were able to slip out of the city without another confrontation. I wondered how many would die before the blaze was under control.

The girl passed out as soon as we were no longer in danger.

I'd never seen a tree before, so it was a little odd to be surrounded by a double handful of them. But the small grove was the first decent cover I'd seen since we left Iwakagure, and I needed to get my bearings.

I was also a little worried about the girl. She hadn't stirred much since she passed out, and I wondered if she was hurt worse than she appeared. I hope that Tetsuo bastard died screaming.

Anyway, the grove was centered on the merging of two small streams. The cool water soothed my throat, but nothing would help my conscience. I tried to drip a little water into her mouth, but that just set her to coughing. She let out a low moan and slowly sat up.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Which was a remarkably stupid question, now that I think about it.

"My stomach hurts," she whispered as she wrapped her arms around her middle.

I ground my teeth. I hoped he had time to scream really loudly. "Look, can you stay here for a minute? You can, er, get cleaned up if you want to, and I'll get us some clothes."

She dully looked down at herself. "He cut my shirt. I liked that shirt."

"I'll get you some new clothes," I promised – not that my track record was worth a shit with her. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She just nodded. So I grunted and stood up.

Night was falling, so it wasn't that hard to sneak up on what looked to be a fairly prosperous farmstead and 'liberate' some clothes from their laundry. Funny the euphemisms you use for stealing when it's you doing the thievery. I found a dark green kimono close to my size, along with some black drawstring pants. I also stole a short, pale yellow dress and dark brown leggings that looked like they would fit the girl. I lingered long enough to steal a quartet of eggs from their chickens.

It was almost fully dark by the time I returned to the small grove of trees. I found the girl near where I'd left her, but sitting in the stream. She was chattering from the cold water and crying her eyes out, her body racked by silent sobs. I dropped the bundled clothes to the ground and sat down on the bank near her, completely at a loss as for what to do.

She jumped as I sat down, and the next thing I knew her arms were wrapped around my shins. She was shaking so hard she almost pulled me off the bank. "I thought you weren't coming back," she said miserably, then hiccupped.

I awkwardly patted her head. "You aren't getting rid of me that easily," I said, with confidence I did *not* feel. I wondered how often the old man had to do that with me.

She looked up at me. "Promise?" she asked warily.

I nodded, ignoring the jabs from my conscience.

"Thank you," she said. Then she wrinkled her nose. "You smell bad," she said. Then she frowned and pulled a lock of crimson hair in front of her nose. "I smell bad," she concluded.

"Use the stream to get clean," I suggested gently as I stood up and separated the bundles of clothes. I moved downstream far enough to be just out of sight around some bushes.

"There's no soap," she said, her voice quavering a little.

I shucked off the pants I'd worn longer than I cared to think about and jumped into the stream. "There's sand along the bottom," I replied. "You can use that to scrub away dirt, and then rinse it off." Old man said that was almost as good as soap on a long mission – it was hard to sneak around if you stank.

She didn't say anything for a while. I stretched out, luxuriating as the chill water flowed over my body. I'd never felt anything like this before. I dunked my head and began trying to strip away some of the blood and grease in my hair as I rinsed away the ashes and smoky smell.

When I pulled my head up out of the water, I heard the girl's voice again. "Where are you?" she cried out.

I cringed at the noise and forced myself not to snap. "I'm here," I replied in a loud whisper. "I was just washing my hair."

"Oh," she said in a quieter voice.

"What did you want?" I asked as I rinsed off and stood up. I was a little raw where I'd raked my nails over the skin, trying to rid myself of as much dirt as possible. I'd never had a chance to bathe like this before, and I didn't want to waste it.

"Did… did I kill that man?" she asked.

"You distracted the others enough that I was able to get away from them," I answered. It wasn't exactly what she asked, but I had no idea how to tell her the truth. Would she be glad she'd killed the bastard? Would she break down? I had no frigging idea, and I wished the old man had given a lecture or two on how to deal with distraught females. Especially since this was partially my fault, dammit.

"I'm glad *you* got away," she said tonelessly. There was a little splashing, so I waited a few minutes after it stopped before I walked back around the bushes again.

She was dressed and sitting huddled on the grass near the bank. I sat down cross-legged next to her.

"Thank you for the clothes," she said.

I nodded and pulled two of the eggs out of the folds of my kimono and handed them to her. She looked at me questioningly as I pulled out the other pair. "Old man said these are good to eat. Use your eye tooth to punch a small hole in one end and suck out what's inside."

She watched me do it, so I tried not to bobble it too badly. The liquid protein was thick on my tongue, but I swallowed it anyway. She copied my motions, but made a face after swallowing. "It tastes yucky," she said.

I shrugged. "It'll keep you warm through the night. I'll try to steal something tastier for breakfast."

She frowned. "My… they told me stealing was bad."

I nodded. "It is, but we are operating in enemy territory, so that's a little different. It's okay to do bad things to enemies."

"Enemies?" she asked. Her eyes took on a faraway look for a moment, and then she nodded. "You're right… uhm. What is your name?"

That question brought me up short. Old man had always called me 'kid', but I knew that was also the general term. I shrugged after a moment. "I don't have one," I admitted.

That little revelation made her mouth drop open. "How can you not have a name?" she asked - a little disbelieving and a little outraged at the same time.

I sighed. "Because it was always just me and the old man in that cell, as long as I can remember. If he was talking out loud, I knew he was talking to me, and vice-versa. Come to think of it, I don't know if he had a name either."

"He had to have a name. Especially if he was old. He wasn't always in that… cell? Was he?"

I shook my head. "No, he wasn't."

"Did he do something bad?" she asked, more innocent than accusing.

"The Tsuchikage thought so. He put the seal on me, but he didn't make it so it would break my mind. That's why he was imprisoned for the rest of his life," I answered, my grief making my words come out more bitter than I intended.

"My father is a bad man," she concluded sadly, and I belatedly made the connection. They must have raised her within the Tsuchikage's family to try and ensure her loyalty. "He's not even really my father, is he?"

She began to sob quietly again, and I sat there, appalled at my own big mouth. Old man would smack the back of my head if he could see me now. *A righteous rage does not justify the abuse of the innocent* , he'd once said. I gingerly put my hand on her shoulder, cringing as I felt her tense. "It's going to be all right," I said inanely.

"How?" she asked, raising her tear-stained face and pinning me in place with her red-rimmed eyes. "I don't have a family anymore. I never had a family, really." She shook her head and continued, "I have *no one* … I might as well be dead."

Sometimes, when I don't know what to say, I just open my mouth and spout off the first thing that comes to mind. Usually, it's a disaster. "You have me," I said.

That brought her up short. "You?" she asked.

"Yes, me." I pointed toward her stomach. "We have something in common, something almost no one else does."

She eyed me doubtfully. "You won't go away?" she asked.

"I don't plan on it," I answered dryly. "Anything can happen," I continued, paying my respects to Muir Fé, the Kami of bad karma, "but I have no intention of ditching you."

"Promise?" she asked, but at least her eyes were clearing up.

"I promise." I said with a nod.

"How can you promise if you don't have a name?" she asked suddenly. "You can't give your word if there is no word for you, can you?"

I shrugged as I tried to puzzle out her logic.

"Can I give you a name?" she asked.

"I suppose," I agreed. Anything to stop her from crying. I felt really cold and sick when she did that, not knowing if she would ever stop.

She frowned for several minutes, deep in thought. "How about Hikaru?" she finally asked.

I shrugged. "Sounds good to me. You can call me Hikaru if you like."

She gave me a little smile. "Good. Hikaru, my name is Asuka."

"Good to meet you, Asuka," I replied, trying to remember what the old man had said about proper manners for introductions. "Out of curiosity, where did you get the name from?"

"Well, we had a dog named Hikaru," she said. "Until sister hit it with a kunai one day."

I felt my smile falter a little. "I'm sorry. Did you miss him?"

"Not much," she admitted. "He farted a lot so he smelled pretty bad."

I blinked.

"But I always thought he had a neat name," she assured me.

"Well, that's good to know," I observed.

"Why do you have green hair?" she asked.

I looked at a lock hanging down onto my shoulder. It was a slightly darker green than the grass or the leaves, but undeniably the same hue. I shrugged. "I don't know. Why do you have red hair?"

She frowned at me in the gathering gloom. I looked around the stand of trees, which was becoming quite dark as the light faded from the western sky. There was no moon, which left me with mixed feelings. Old man had told me about it, so I wanted to see it almost as much as the sun, but at the same time its absence would make us harder to track. I'd covered a considerable distance while the girl, I mean Asuka, was unconscious. I calculated that we were probably safe for the night, as long as we were moving at dawn.

If we were lucky, the Tsuchikage's men might think we were still inside Iwakagure, or had perished in the fire. But the old man had taught me to never rely on luck. For anything.

We both curled up at the base of a tree, positioned so no one outside the grove could see us. As I drifted off, I was dimly aware of her curling up against my back, shivering a little.

Growing up where I did, I learned to sleep curled up into as tight a ball as possible. This minimized the number of stone edges that could dig into my skin as I slept. While the grove was cooler and far breezier than I was used to, the grass and forest thatch was immeasurably softer.

What woke me up was a pulse of heat, warming my back. An instant later, my sleep-muzzled ears picked up murmured denials and soft cries of pain. I sat up quickly, feeling a hand drop away from my side. Without me in the way, Asuka curled up into a tighter knot of misery. There was another soundless pulse and some of the dried pine needles around her began to smoke.

"Asuka!" I hissed, reaching for her shoulder to shake her awake. My finger-tips stung as they gripped her shoulder, but the heat died away as her eyes shot open. Blazing orange faded to their normal brilliant green. Before I could say anything she had her arms wrapped around my waist and I was awkwardly patting her back. "Nightmare?" I asked.

I could feel her head nod. I felt a chill go down my back as I wondered how close she'd been to another explosion. It didn't matter. I'd made a promise.

We settled back down, leaning against the tree, but this time I kept my arm around her shoulders. I woke twice more before dawn. Each time, I gently shook her until the murmuring stopped and she settled back down.

We left the grove at dawn. Asuka was quiet, but as we walked she stayed as close to me as a second shadow. The gray light made everything seem abnormally still, and my voice seemed too loud as I gently asked her about any training she might have had.

I was relieved; both by her willingness to talk about her former family and by the fact that she was going through basic kunoichi training with her sisters. That immeasurably increased our chances of survival. Then she had a question of her own. "Hikaru, where are we going?"

"Konohagakure," I replied with a smile.

"But they are the enemy!" she said in a shocked voice.

"Whose enemy?" I asked with a tight smile.

"If they are the enemy… of our enemy… does that make them good guys?" she asked, eyes wide.

"Not always," I said. "But old man said that, many years ago, that village was saved by someone… like us. If we want to live where people… like us… will be treated well, then Konoha is our best bet."

She nodded slowly. "He was very smart, wasn't he?"

I nodded, ignoring the tightness in the back of my throat. "Yes. Yes, he was."

My original plan was for us to dress like farmers or villagers and try to *quietly* slip across the border. Old man had given me a pretty good grasp of basic geography, but he wasn't sure how the local conditions might have changed since he'd been locked up.

Slow and steady therefore seemed like the wisest course. Most sneak thieves are idiots: they try to run with their loot, and only end up drawing attention to themselves. Of course, I was also banking on Asuka's nerves, but she'd stayed put while I was getting the crap kicked out of me, so it seemed like a smart bet.

It wasn't until we were overtaken by a merchant and his guards that I realized the flaw in my plan. As they passed us, I heard the men

mutter something about hair. Thinking back, I hadn't seen many people in Iwakagure with red hair, and I hadn't noticed anyone with green hair. Now, my hair is pretty dark, so it looks black from a distance, or in dim light, but the sun was well up and they were *close.*

Motion out of the corner of my eye made me turn, and I pulled Asuka behind me before the guard's hand could close around her shoulder. I was just bringing my hands back around in a basic Taijutsu stance when his eyes widened and he stumbled backward with a gasp. "Demon!" he screamed, pulling out his sword.

The others were shouting and clawing at weapons as well. I backed away, noting that Asuka was right beside me. As the swordsman took a step forward, we jumped backward into the underbrush. In moments we were running down a steep gully lined with scrubby bushes.

What? You wanted to hear how we leapt forward, kicked all their asses, and proved that they shouldn't mess with shinobi? Sorry, our objective was getting past the border, not beating down random travelers. Pointless heroics are for idiots.

Our feet were as swift as they were silent, and soon we were far from the road. As soon as we stopped I looked back the way we came and held my breath so I could hear better. Nothing. Then I swore bitterly. "What the hell was that all about?" I snarled.

It was more of a rhetorical question, but Asuka answered it anyway. "I think he was afraid of your eyes," she said thoughtfully. Then she nodded. "Yes, it had to be your eyes. He'd already seen your hair before you turned."

"What about my eyes?" I asked warily.

"Well," she said. "They're a pretty green, dark green, really. But the black part in the middle is all funny. It's squished together in the middle and sharp on the top and bottom."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I was trying to visualize what she described, but without a lot of luck.

She frowned, raising that crease between her eyebrows again. "I'm not making this up," she said, sticking her lip out a little.

"I… " my voice trailed off and I took a deep breath. "I didn't say you were, Asuka, I'm just having trouble picturing what you are describing."

"Well…" she said, "they look a little like snake's eyes. I saw one in a picture book.

I stared at her.

"It's true," she said defensively. "Don't you ever look in a mirror?"

"I've never seen a mirror," I replied. My stomach was still sinking. What the hell had that damn seal done to me, anyway? There was almost no chance of my original plan working.

"Oh," Asuka said, looking down.

"All right," I said, trying to sound confident. That's a pretty good trick after committing a colossal blunder, let me tell you. "I don't think we can pose as villagers. Do you?"

Asuka shook her head.

"Then we go with plan B," I said with a sigh.

"Plan B?" Asuka asked, cocking her head.

"We run like hell. Those idiots are probably already spreading the word about us, so it won't be long until the 'Kage's men come." I paused. "I'm going to push us to the best pace we can make. I'm not going to leave you, but you need to let me know when you start getting tired, all right?"

Asuka nodded, but I noticed she was trembling. I gave her a quick, but intensely awkward hug as she sniffed. "I don't want to go back," she whispered.

"Then show me how fast you can run," I said as I stepped back.

The rest of that day was spent in constant motion. I shouldn't have had that much endurance. While I could do a lot of Taijutsu drills, the cell I'd grown up in wasn't very conducive toward long-distance running. For that matter, I didn't think Asuka's kunoichi training dwelt on it in any detail either. My best guess is that the presence of our "tenants" was making this easier. About time the bastards did something to help.

We made surprisingly good speed, but I'm still amazed we cleared the border without any trouble. Maybe from the description those guards gave of us, they thought we were still trying to sneak out. Idiots.

I was still stunned by our good fortune when a kunai slammed into a tree trunk right in front of me. I dived to the ground, pulling Asuka with me. I got a tree trunk behind me, and Asuka in between, when I rolled to my feet. I saw motion out of the corner of my eye and leaned back just in time for a huge shuriken to skim past my face. I was turning to face the way it came when the wire it trailed wrapped across my chest. I was yanked backward, knocking Asuka off her feet as well. We were pinned against the tree trunk as the shuriken orbited the tree a dozen times before embedding in the bark next to my head.

Asuka was gasping, trying to get her wind back as I struggled against the wire. Three men wearing ceramic masks with animal features dropped to the ground in front of us. What is up with those masks, anyway? I thought we were about to be mugged by a gang of rogue mimes.

"This isn't Kanareto, they're just kids," the largest one, who sported a bear mask, observed.

"No shit," I replied. My ego was throbbing a bit from how easily we'd been caught.

"Kids or not, nobody who moves like that can be a villager," the weasel-mask observed.

My brain began to catch up with my feet. If they didn't recognize Asuka, then… "Are you Konoha shinobi?" I asked.

"What does it matter to you?" the raven-mask asked.

"Are we in Fire Country?" I asked, raising my jaw and trying to look like I wasn't scared. Trying, anyway.

"You are," the bear said after a moment. "Why does that matter?"

"Because we've been running like hell to get out of Earth Country," I said, hoping I wasn't using too many large words. "We want to defect."

"You?" the weasel asked, derisively.

"She's the Tsuchikage's daughter," I said, playing my hole card.

The three masked marvels looked quickly at each other. I don't know why, it wasn't like they were suddenly going to become attractive. "And you?" the bear asked.

"You could say I'm an escaped prisoner," I said carefully.

"They're full of it," weasel insisted.

I shrugged as well as I could with my arms bound to my sides. "If I am, then let the Hokage deal with me. I'm sure a hidden village has enough nasty jobs to do if he feels the need to punish me."

"Kanareto is long gone by now. We'll take them to the Hokage," bear said, and I relaxed a little.

"We're going to regret this," weasel predicted.

"Life is full of regrets," I said in a philosophical tone, much like the one old man used to drive me up a wall. Then I leaned forward and peered at the shinobi who doubted my honesty. "How come you don't wear a mask like the other two?" I asked, trying to sound puzzled.

He cursed under his breath as he wrenched his shuriken from the tree.

Of course, with the escort, who I later learned were members of the ANBU squad, we made pretty good time. When we arrived at Konoha, they escorted us through the gates with little more than a hand-wave.

Konohagakure had a much different feel than Iwakagure. I hadn't seen much of the latter, except as a blur, but Asuka confirmed it for me later. People were much more fearful in the Tsuchikage's capital. The officials were haughtier as well. Konoha seemed relatively relaxed, for a hidden village, anyway.

We got some odd glances as we were escorted through the streets. I walked with my head hanging forward, and let my hair shroud my face a little. I also squinted as much as I could. At least the looks I received were not universally hostile. Asuka garnered more sympathetic looks, and I relaxed a little. She'd probably be okay here, even if I wasn't.

"So Hokage-sama" I said, "this is how we came to be brought before you. Asuka and I will answer any questions you wish. At least she can when she wakes up. Anyway, as you are aware, with our… special circumstances… I am sure that we could prove useful to your village."

Author's Notes:

Many thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile fortheir beta work!

This story will contain little to no Japanese flavor-words. All the jutsu names will be in English. If you are wondering why, when Ibowed to requests to use Japanese jutsu names in Team 8, all the langauge-snobs came out of the woodwork. Everyone had complaints, none of which agreed, by the way, and no one offered any solutions or assistance. So I said to hell with it. You know who to blame.

Welcome to Konoha

Chapter Two

The Hokage, the leader and strongest of the Konoha shinobi was not what I expected.

For example, what kind of ninja takes up smoking a pipe? I mean, the smell of that smoke would linger around you like a miasma. How the hell do you sneak up on someone when you stink? Of course, his 'sneaking around' days are probably over, unless he's sneaking up on a bottle of 'special medicine'. I mean, I thought the Old Man was old, but the Hokage made him look pretty damn good.

Of course, I found out later that he'd actually retired – he was really the *Third* Hokage, and had stepped down to let the Fourth take over… until a certain nine-tailed public menace decided to pay a little visit. So I cut him a little slack.

But when we first met, I was wondering if we'd come to the right place. Then I remembered how easily that trio of mimes had captured us… and they called this old codger boss, too. Maybe there was more to him, and Konoha, than was readily apparent. Asuka seemed to trust him as well. She slumped tiredly in her chair the minute he'd asked us to sit down.

On the other hand, it wasn't looking too promising at the moment, because he was frowning. "So you came to Konoha because of Uzumaki Naruto?"

"Who?" I asked. Then my brain turned back on. "Oh, you mean the one who holds the Kyuubi."

"Yes. I find it… interesting that he is so well known in Iwakagure," he replied in a dubious tone.

"I don't think they necessarily know who it is," I assured him. "Or at least the Old- my sensei was not privy to that information."

"I see," he murmured thoughtfully. "I understand your reasons for coming here," he said after a moment, "but what you ask is not a small thing. On the other hand, if Konoha were to turn you away, we risk you being found by our enemies and used against us at a later date."

I supposed he wanted us to think he hadn't considered the third option – cutting our throats. But I kept my silence.

"However," he continued after a moment, "harboring you does bring additional danger to Konoha."

I snapped my head upward like I'd been struck. I looked at Asuka for a moment then turned to glare at him. Fortunately, she'd started dozing as I told my tale, and I don't think she heard his words.

But the Hokage merely held up his hand as I started to retort. "No, I imagine she will be able to control herself, particularly with you to help her. She would not have survived in the Tsuchikage's household if it were otherwise," the Hokage said slowly as my blood cooled. Had he phrased that in such a way as to gauge my reaction? Canny old bastard if he was, and as bad as another old man I'd known.

"What sort of hazard do you envision, Hokage-sama?" I asked respectfully. I wouldn't let him bait me into saying something rude that I could justly be punished for.

"There are… groups… who would wish to make use of children such as you," he said in somber tone. "They are very dangerous, and your presence here may draw their attention even faster than a single one. For your own protection, and to aid Konoha, would the two of you be willing to complete your ninja training? As members of The Leaf you would be bound to protect Konoha, even as it helps protect you."

I struggled to keep my composure. If he would let us stay, my second request was to do just that. It was odd that he was making it a requirement. It implied that whoever he was referring to must be pretty formidable. I wrote that on "things to worry about later", a scroll that was nearing infinite length in my mind.

Of course, I didn't discount the possibility that he just wanted to use us against Konoha's enemies. But that was likely to happen no matter where we went, and at least he was being up front about it. As official members of The Leaf, we'd also have the same rights and privileges as regular citizens of Konoha – which seemed to be a step up for both of us.

I glanced over at Asuka, who awoke with a start when her chin touched her chest. "As long as we are not separated," I said. "I made a promise, you understand…" I felt ridiculous saying such a thing, but the Hokage didn't laugh. Asuka gave me a small smile and suddenly I didn't care because I knew I'd done the right thing.

"I don't think that will be a problem," the Hokage agreed. "If you both manage to graduate from the Academy together, it might be possible to place you on the same team as well. Until you are able to go on missions to earn money, I will see to your upkeep. Where to house you poses an issue though…" his voice trailed off and he looked thoughtful.

I wasn't about to interrupt him. He was being more than generous, so I knew there had to be a catch.

"For obvious reasons, you two should stay in a secure area," the Hokage said thoughtfully. I figured it was about even odds that he already had some place in mind, but didn't want to let on. "I have an ANBU squad keeping an eye on one apartment building in particular, where Naruto lives. It's an older building, but that might be the best place for you to stay. He's out of the country right now on a mission, but he should be back soon."

"He doesn't live with his family?" I asked.

The Hokage's eyes went a little unfocused. "They were lost in the attack."

"Then why doesn't he live with you?" Asuka asked, frowning. I agreed with her. You'd think the savior of the village would have some nice digs, after all.

"I should probably explain some things," the old man said in a tired voice. "The two of you should think carefully before you advertise your… conditions, or talk about Naruto. The village suffered incredible losses when the Kyuubi attacked. Many families were completely wiped out, and almost every survivor had lost friends and relatives. The Yondaime wanted Naruto to be seen as the hero of the village, but there are many who cannot put the past behind them and see him for what he is. They hate and fear him, and many called for his death as soon as it was understood what my successor had done. I created a law as soon as I returned from my retirement. The adults of Konoha are not allowed to talk of the Kyuubi or it being sealed within Naruto. I hoped he would be allowed to at least grow up with children who didn't hate and fear him. Though silenced, the adults still shunned the boy, and their children picked up on this and did the same. Naruto has very few friends. He wants to become Hokage some day so that everyone will be forced to recognize him."

"That's the most incredibly fucked up thing I have ever heard," I breathed, forgetting my manners in my outrage.

Asuka made a peculiar noise, something between a hiccup and a sob. Her face was reddening, so I put my hand on her shoulder.

The Hokage sighed. "Naruto learned the truth from Mizuki, an instructor at the Academy who turned traitor. Fortunately, the two of them were found by Iruka, who convinced Naruto that he didn't blame the boy for the deaths of his parents. The traitor tried to kill Iruka, but surprisingly Naruto rose to the occasion and defeated Mizuki."

"But he still lives alone because the adults hate him. He's only what, twelve, thirteen years old? No one would take him into their home, would they?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

The Hokage slowly shook his head. "No, and it wasn't really safe to let him live here, not with the factions in the village who wish him harm. I carefully selected the ANBU shinobi that watch Naruto's home; they are people I would personally trust with my life. They watch that building twenty-four hours a day, and a couple shadowed Naruto while he was attending the Academy… though he tended to lose them when he wanted to." The old man actually smiled a little at the end.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Naruto was very lonely as a child, so he would pull pranks for attention," the Hokage said, "some of which were quite elaborate."

I scowled, but Asuka looked even more upset. "I think we should be Naruto's neighbors," she said, turning toward me.

"I suppose," I reluctantly agreed, not sure if I wanted to live next to a prankster. I was also disappointed to discover that the ' *heroic* Jinchuuriki' my teacher had built up in my mind was just as screwed as the rest of us.

Asuka frowned, blinking rapidly. "Hikaru, *he's one of us.* Remember what you told me?"

I sighed. There was no way I could possibly win that argument, so I didn't even try. "Yes, I remember," was the only thing I could say to her.

A couple of hours later, we were sitting in a small, furnished apartment with a small bag of money. Carefully budgeted, our stipend would purchase what we needed to enter the Konoha Ninja

Academy, and leave enough for us to purchase a week's worth of food.

Of course, compared to my prior accommodations, this place was the lap of luxury. I lay on a bed for the first time, too disconcerted by the softness to sleep. I heard Asuka sigh as she came out of the bathroom, heading toward her room.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I… I feel stupid," she said.

"You're not stupid," I disagreed.

"Is it stupid to miss my stuff?" she asked. "I'm not sorry I left, not after… but I miss my toothbrush, and my comb, and my blue shoes, and my stuffed…"

"No, it's not stupid," I said firmly. "You're in an unfamiliar place, so you feel a little disoriented, that's all. I even miss that cell a little bit."

"You're making fun of me," she said petulantly.

I shook my head. "No, this bed is way too soft. It feels weird to me. You are about the only familiar thing in this place."

She smiled a little, and then sniffed. Suddenly tears began pouring down her face. "Asuka?" I asked.

She shook her head and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. While I was sort of an idiot about such things, even I could tell that something was wrong. When she eventually choked out that she was afraid to go to sleep, I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. Sleeping in a separate room, if she had a nightmare without someone there to wake her…

At that point there was nothing to do but move the other bed into the first bedroom. After a moment's thought I pushed them together as

well. This would have to do until she got over her night terrors, no matter how awkward it was.

She must have been running on nervous energy and fear, because no sooner did she push her shoulder into my back than I heard her breathing go quiet and even.

Oddly enough, the softness of the bed stopped bothering me so much and I was able drift off to sleep after that.

Spending the first decade or so of your life in an underground cell gives you some odd habits. It was perfectly soundless when we slept, except for the old man's snoring, so I tended to be a light sleeper.

When there was a distant crack of wood breaking, I jolted out of my sleep. I sat up, looking around, and then I heard another crack. I got up as silently as I could. I was still wearing my loose drawstring pants, and my feet were quite thoroughly calloused, so I went directly to our front door and opened it.

A knot of people were just down the darkened hall, clustered around one of the doors. One of them threw himself forward and there was another loud crack as the door gave up and split apart.

"What the fuck are you assholes up to?" I yelled. I was pretty sure I knew whose door that was.

Several of the adults flinched at the sound of my voice, and one even gave out a yelp. Then another voice from the middle of the group said, "Relax, it's not him. It's some other brat. I told you the fox is out of the country right now."

"Very nice, losers," I called out scornfully as I stepped fully into the hall. There was no way ninjas could possibly make that much noise, so these had to be simple villagers. Simple-minded anyway. "He's away on a mission *for Konoha* , so you want to burgle his apartment

while he's away. How nice. Why don't you get the hell out of here before I throw you out?" The old man who'd raised me was occasionally… *creative* … in his use of language, and I appear to have picked up some of his bad habits. Pity.

"We don't want him here!" one of the shadowy figures snarled, and my patience snapped.

I funneled a little more chakra into my legs than I intended, because I felt the cheap carpet tear under my feet as I charged forward. I ran until I was right next to them, and then dropped on one foot as the man I'd been charging at swung on empty air. He looked rather foolish, but I suppose *he* thought it was impressive. While he was doing that, I dug my fingers into the carpet and swept my *other* leg in a circle around me. The man before me, as well as two others, hit the ground, knocking back those behind them. One guy swung a length of metal pipe at my head, but his attack was so laughably slow that I merely snatched it out of his hands and jabbed him in the solar plexus with it. He went down, wheezing for breath. "Got to cut back on the smoking if you want to fight ninjas," I said with a smirk as I jumped backward.

The two who'd been trying to tackle me managed to slam their heads together as they converged on the empty space where I'd just been. I shook my head in mock sympathy. What a pack of losers.

They were starting to get up again, glaring and muttering. I saw a glint of steel as someone pulled out a tanto knife. I narrowed my eyes and took a deep breath. The odds of this ending without someone's blood on the floor were getting lower by the minute. I was determined that it wasn't going to be mine though.

Then there was a loud pop as clouds of smoke engulfed the hallway. I did a quick somersault backwards, but spun around as I felt a presence behind me. I threw myself to one side so I had a wall at my back as the smoke cleared. Then I saw it was one of the ninja-mimes, this one wearing a stylized cat-mask.

I relaxed a little from my guard position and looked back down the hall. When the smoke clouds dissipated, they revealed three more of the ANBU shinobi surrounding the welcome wagon losers.

"Thank Kami you are here!" one of the quicker-witted cretins gasped. "That crazy kid attacked us!"

"He lives here," one of the ANBU replied in a bored voice. "Which brings us to a better question. What, precisely, are you doing here at four in the morning?"

As they began a frantic babble of bullshit, I turned to the ANBU who'd startled me out of a year's growth. "What took you so long?" I asked in a conversational tone.

"We usually wait until they actually get through the door," he said in a bored voice. "That way we can charge them for burglary instead of just vandalism."

"Ah," I said, feeling a little stupid. "Isn't that a little hard on the doors?"

"We've replaced that door three times since he left town," the ANBU explained, still bored. I suppose door-watching duty is not a sought after assignment, and that I had just spoiled the only fun they had. I may never recover from the guilt.

I scowled. "Would you guys be offended if I made an example out of the next bunch? Getting beaten down by someone my age would be even more embarrassing, wouldn't it?"

"I'll include your offer in my report to the Hokage," he said in that same indifferent tone. "Get some sleep," he said as he sauntered off down the hallway, "Iruka will have no mercy on you if you fall asleep in class."

I twitched a little at that, but it only stood to reason that the Hokage would have fully briefed them in about Asuka and me. I turned back

toward our apartment and grimaced when I saw the girl glaring at me from the doorway.

"They weren't shinobi, just untrained villagers," I said as she opened her mouth, "nothing worth losing your beauty sleep over."

She flushed a little, and he supposed most people would consider that scowl to be cute on someone her age. But she did allow me to draw her away from the doorway so I could close the door.

In the morning, we got cleaned up and looking as presentable as possible… which wasn't very in my case. We had a short list of the equipment we'd need for the Konoha Ninja Academy, and we were to purchase it and present ourselves at noon to a teacher there named Iruka. From what the Hokage had said, he sounded like one of the more intelligent people in Konoha, so I was looking forward to it. Or maybe dreading it a little less.

The old man had done the best he could with regards to my education, but there were some things that our circumstances forced him to neglect. I had yet to touch a kunai in my life, and unless I turned out to be some remarkable unknown prodigy, my throwing accuracy with kunai and shuriken was likely to be abysmal. My calligraphy practice had been very constrained, and I assumed that would be pretty rough as well.

On the other hand, my taijutsu and my chakra control seemed to be fairly advanced, from what Asuka could tell me of her training. Despite her more well-rounded education, she was a little worried as well. If we wanted to be assigned to a team together, it meant that she had to make sure she was ready to pass the genin exam at a younger age than most.

So we were a little stressed as we hurried to gather our school supplies. As we were harried out of the first shop, I was forcibly reminded that my appearance made people uncomfortable. The typical Konoha reaction to such discomfort was… somewhat aggressive.

We were forced to waste a couple of coins so Asuka could slip into a hat-maker's shop and buy a large straw hat for me. I'd normally just let her do all the purchases, but she wasn't sure she'd buy the right things. At least with the hat, my eyes were hidden in shadows and we could converse in whispers. I still let Asuka handle the money and talk to the shopkeepers. I think she might have even gotten a discount or two.

I only really had trouble in one more store. The sight of all that paper for sale made my fingers twitch and my knees tremble. By all the gods, there was enough paper in that one shop that I could write forever and not use it all. I had to forcibly remind myself that we still needed to buy food; otherwise the remainder of our money might have been spent on paper and ink.

Hey, think about my teacher and what our cell was severely lacking, before you laugh at me! Ink that didn't come out of my veins was both a novelty and a luxury. And paper? Forget it. All I had was the floor! Although there was *one* time where the old man picked the wrong time for a nap…

Anyway, we managed to report to the Konoha Ninja Academy at the stroke of noon, both of us carrying a bag full of books, paper, writing implements, and weapons. We each also sported a pair of sandals that covered most of the foot, Asuka's in blue and mine in black. She seemed particularly relieved to not be barefoot anymore, and I remembered her saying something about a pair of blue shoes… but I decided not to ask her as she counted out the money.

Iruka appeared at the gates and led us inside to a small office. He peered at me curiously until I sighed and took off the straw hat.

He immediately blanched and didn't quite suppress his flinch.

I scowled. "Look," I snapped, "I understand that I'm not the most attractive guy in town, but would you explain to me why you look like you just saw a ghost?"

"My apologies," Iruka said with a bow of his head. "The Hokage said you were partially trained in the ninja arts. Have you heard of the Sannin?"

I frowned as I cudgeled my memory. "A trio of S-class shinobi, loyal to Konoha, even though they have left?" From some of the stories the old man had told of them, I suspected they were not condemned as missing-nins because no one wanted to piss them off.

"That is… mostly… true," Iruka said approvingly. "However, the Snake Sannin, Orochimaru, *is* , in fact a traitor to Konoha. He was involved in the grisly deaths of countless shinobi and villagers before he was discovered."

I nodded. "And?" I prompted.

"I've seen his picture in the Bingo Book, and you bear an unfortunate resemblance to him. His hair is black and his eyes are yellow, but the complexion is the same and…" the instructor shrugged as things started to make sense. I'd seen a lot of odd-looking people as we walked around that morning, most of whom I guessed were shinobi. I knew it couldn't be the shape of my eyes alone that was scaring adults who had no issues with a guy covered with bugs, or those weirdoes with no pupils in their eyes.

"That's not fair," Asuka huffed. "It's not his fault his skin is so pale! If anything, it's my… someone else's fault."

"So I look like this Orochimaru's bastard love child. Wonderful." I said, rubbing at my temples. "I know why I look like this, and it has nothing to do with whoever knocked up the Iwakagure whore that birthed me."

Asuka hissed and Iruka visibly winced at my words. I felt a little guilty then. He'd apologized and I *did* ask him why. It wasn't his fault that I didn't like the answer. I held my hand up in a placating gesture. "Sorry. It's not your fault, so I'm not blaming you… but do you have any suggestions on what I can do, besides a permanent illusion?"

"You can do Henge no jutsu?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not very well," I admitted. "I can't hold it for more than half an hour at a time."

Iruka blinked, and then shook his head. "You're right, it would be inadvisable to use that. I would suggest cutting your hair much shorter. Orochimaru was always known to have long hair. Is your complexion from lack of sunlight?"

I nodded. "My original teacher and I were imprisoned for roughly ten years until I escaped last week."

Iruka's face transformed for a moment, and I was reminded that this man was a Konoha shinobi. Then he mastered his emotions and the patient instructor began to reappear. "That's barbaric, imprisoning a child!" he snapped. "What could you have possibly done to deserve that?" he asked.

I started to answer, but my eyes were drawn to a picture on his desk. He was shown standing next to a smiling blond boy about my age who also wore a forehead protector. What drew my eyes was not the shinobi insignia, but the faint whisker marks on his cheeks. Suddenly, quite a few things clicked together in my mind. "Is that Naruto?" I asked, pointing to the picture.

Iruka nodded, obviously confused as to the thrust of my question. The Hokage obviously trusted this man, and he *was* one of the few people who accepted Naruto for what he really was. So I decided to take a chance. "I suppose you could say that my… appearance… is the way it is, for the same reason he has those whisker marks. That's also the reason we were imprisoned."

To his credit, Iruka's eyes only widened a little as he sat back in his seat. After a moment, he spoke again, "I am ashamed to admit it, but it would be better for you if people thought you were Orochimaru's son than… something else." His eyes flickered over to Asuka and he frowned.

"She helped me to escape Iwakagure," I said, which was technically true. Her Biju hadn't marked her as obviously as mine, so Iruka might buy it.

"I am the same way, sensei," she said, frowning at me.

"I'd appreciate it if no one else knew of this," I said quietly, ignoring the girl's glare.

"You have my word," Iruka said, his voice steady, even though his eyes were a little wide. "From what I understand, the two of you have some prior training?"

I nodded.

"Everyone in my… household was trained," Asuka said.

"The Hokage requested that you both be placed in the same class," Iruka said, "though you are a bit younger, Asuka."

"I have some… gaps in my skills," I said slowly.

"Perhaps it would be better to evaluate you both then," he said with a smile that made the scar across his nose wrinkle. "I planned for this and arranged for someone to cover my advanced class today." A loud crash echoed down the hallway, followed by the tinkle of broken glass. Iruka's smile grew even wider. "Let's head out to the exercise yard before it gets even noisier."

As we left the building, I thought I heard the faint echo of a scream. What the hell had we gotten into here?

The evaluation was a lot like a fairly urgent medical procedure: Painful, embarrassing, but necessary. I knew it was going to be a long afternoon when my first kunai throw completely missed the target board. Asuka could at least hit the board, though she was less

than happy with her accuracy. I got a little better after Iruka showed me how to hold a kunai, but it was still fairly humiliating.

The taijutsu was better, and I at least felt I wasn't shaming the old man when I faced off against Iruka. Of course, as a chuunin he handled me pretty easily, but I at least made him block and step back a couple of times. Asuka's strikes didn't seem to have as much power, but she had a fair bit of speed and moved very gracefully.

Ninjutsus were a little less promising. I knew all the seals by heart, but the old man couldn't mold chakra at all within the suppression field on our cell, so he couldn't demonstrate anything. I knew the theory behind Kawarimi, the substitution technique, but I didn't have any targets I could practice on. I was, however, able to do a damn near flawless henge of the old man, since he was the only target I could practice on. Iruka seemed encouraged by my performance there.

I was shocked, and maybe a little envious, when Asuka did a quick series of seals and blew a stream of fire out of her mouth, setting a patch of grass ablaze. She definitely seemed to have a gift for fire techniques. Probably went with the temper and the red hair.

I was completely useless with genjutsus, mind-bending illusion techniques, and Asuka wasn't much better. Iruka tried to cheer us up by telling us that new genins were rarely much better, unless they had a special gift for it.

The academic evaluations were a little more promising. Asuka obviously had well-paid tutors like her 'siblings', but she'd also paid attention to them. All those hours listening to the old man's lectures paid off as well. I was also gratified to discover that calligraphy was *much* easier with the proper equipment. When I was done, Iruka seemed pleasantly surprised. Asuka was still transcribing the same passage, and her characters weren't quite as detailed as mine, nor as crisply executed. Still, he looked a little disturbed when I shrugged and said "This is good ink, much easier to work with than blood."

When we were done, Iruka gave us two options. We could join the class that was getting ready to test for graduation from the Academy in a few weeks, or the next one behind it. We would have to really work hard to pass all areas in time for the next genin exam, and in the second class we would be well ahead of the students, but won't be taking the test for another year.

I looked over at Asuka. She stared back at me with her face all scrunched up, her lips pressed together in a thin line and that vertical crease between her eyebrows was back again. She looked either very determined or very constipated, it was hard to tell. The former option seemed the safest assumption. "The more advanced class?" I asked her.

She nodded.

"We'll go with the more advanced," I said. "The sooner we are earning our own way, the better."

Iruka nodded and sighed. "Then I will see you in classroom three tomorrow at eight a.m. sharp. I understand you are staying in Naruto's apartment building as well?"

I nodded. "It's not too bad, except for the vermin I caught trying to break into his flat."

At that point, Iruka-sensei wanted to know the whole story. He seemed puzzled by the time it was over. "How did you knock those men down?" he asked. "Your taijutsu isn't that strong."

"Well, I was pushing chakra into my legs when I swept them," I said, like it wasn't obvious.

Iruka blinked. "That's not a degree of chakra control we normally see in our genin. Why didn't you do that when we sparred?"

"Oh," I said, nonplussed. "I thought you wanted to assess my taijutsu, not how well I can cheat while using taijutsu."

"Cheating?" he asked with a laugh.

"That's what the old man called it. He said I shouldn't depend on it, and only use it in dangerous fights, or I will over-rely on it, get sloppy, and die, bringing shame to him and all his ancestors." The old bastard liked to lay it on a little thick at times, but I got the point.

Iruka actually laughed out loud, and after a shocked expression, Asuka giggled as well. I sort of understood her surprise. Konohagakure was full of contradictions; faceless ANBU and garrulous old Hokages, idiotic villagers and instructors who actually dared to smile, let alone laugh. These Leafs were an odd bunch. Maybe we would fit in better than I thought.

Iruka surprised us again by asking if we wanted to eat an early dinner with him. Asuka accepted for both of us before I could say anything. I was a little suspicious, but she seemed to trust 'Iruka-sensei' more than I did.

Nonetheless, when we walked outside, she was practically within my shadow. Oddly enough, that actually made me feel a little better. Maybe because it indicated she was maintaining an appropriate degree of paranoia.

If Iruka noticed this, he didn't say anything. Soon he'd led us to a noodle-stand not too far from our apartment called "Ichiraku's". I was a little dubious about the location, but the smell coming from the cramped cooking area had my mouth watering.

Oddly enough, when Iruka told the older man behind the counter that we were Naruto's new neighbors, he immediately smiled and offered us a bowl on the house. I blinked, looking squarely at him, but he just shrugged and said Naruto was his best customer.

"What's his favorite flavor?" I asked, since I had no idea what most of the varieties on the menu would taste like.

"Usually pork or miso," the cook said thoughtfully, "but he liked to try something different every few bowls."

"Every few bowls?" I asked.

Iruka snorted.

"Er, I'll try the miso then," I said, while Iruka asked for beef. Asuka peered at the menu a little longer before asking for the crab-flavored.

As the cook set to work seasoning the broth and starting a fresh batch of noodles, I turned to look at Iruka. "I take it he eats here a lot?"

"You could say that, Hikaru," he said with a grin. "He practically lives off ramen, between here and making cup ramen at home."

"It must be pretty good," I said cautiously.

"Sometimes when he was upset, I'd take him here for dinner," Iruka said quietly. "For a long time, I think I was his only friend."

That jibed with what I'd heard from the Hokage, but it didn't exactly make me want to jump for joy either. "And now?" I prompted.

"He's gotten through to a few people," Iruka said. "He has his teammates now, and a new jonin-sensei. The Hokage's grandson idolizes him."

"But the rest of Konoha?" I asked.

Iruka sighed. "They still see only what they want to see. You encountered some of them last night."

"They suck," Asuka said firmly. "I was sad when the ANBU showed up and Hikaru had to stop hitting them."

I rolled my eyes as Iruka chuckled. "Why are you bringing this up?" I asked.

Iruka's face grew somber once again. "I don't see as much of Naruto anymore. Not since he graduated, and I'm still a little concerned about him. I don't know how well he gets along with his new team or…" he frowned as his voice trailed off.

"And you want us to spy on him?" I asked coldly.

"No, no!" Iruka said quickly. "Just please… keep an eye on him. He's too alone, and I… I worry about him. I would hope that you would tell me if he was in trouble, or needed anything, but I won't ask you to invade his privacy on my behalf."

The poke in my ribs from Asuka was more than expected. "My apologies," I said in a formal tone, "I misunderstood your request, sensei."

Iruka waved off my apology. "Don't worry about it. I do hope you two get to know him though. For all his flaws, he is a good person. I'm glad I got to know him when I had the chance."

At that point three steaming bowls were placed before us. I mimicked Asuka and Iruka's actions as they placed their hands together and said "Itadakimasu!" before taking out their chopsticks. All the fumbling with uncooperative utensils and strange dining customs disappeared from my head after I took my first bite of the hot noodles.

While the food in the Tsuchikage's prison may have been warmed at some point in time, it was never delivered to our underground cell in such a condition. Likewise, my understanding of spices and flavorings was mostly theoretical, from the old man's reminiscences. As I chewed, the salty-tangy taste of the miso flavorings flooded my mouth, and I ignored the complaints of my slightly-singed lips and gums. This was *really* good stuff. It required a major act of willpower to avoid gobbling it down as fast as I could shovel it into my mouth. Instead, I savored it as much as I could. When the bowl was empty of noodles, I copied Iruka and slowly drank down the broth. When I

was done, my stomach felt like it had been replaced with fire-warmed stones.

I turned to look at Asuka, feeling like I'd just experienced some sort of religious conversion. "It's good," she said, and smiled.

Good? This was beyond good, it was… not prison food. That's what it was. I abruptly deflated and turned back toward Iruka. "I can see why you both eat here a lot," I said.

Iruka smiled and put some money on the counter. "As I said, I will see you tomorrow morning for class, so don't be late. And let me know if you need anything or if you have any questions. The Hokage has asked that I keep an eye out for you two while you are at the Academy, and I take my responsibilities seriously. But I know you will both do well. Study hard, and you will succeed!"

"Yes, Iruka-sensei!" Asuka said brightly. I merely nodded. I wasn't so sure about all this rah-rah stuff, but I wasn't afraid of a little hard work.

After Iruka left, we politely declined when the cook asked if we wanted another bowl. We couldn't really afford to use up all of our food money here, no matter how tasty it was.

"But Iruka-san left enough for three bowls, and I said you two's were on the house, so each of you get one more!" the man said with a grin.

It was a little unnerving, the way some people were trying so hard to be nice to us. Well, it was for me, anyway. Asuka seemed a little less suspicious though. After we each ordered our second bowl, I asked her why.

"Well," she whispered, "I think Iruka wants us to be friends with Naruto."

"Really?" I asked.

"Well, he's always talking about what a nice guy he is, and how he doesn't have many friends in Konoha. What do you think?"

"I think Konoha has a lot of people with crap for brains and a few smart ones," I said in a serious, but still quiet voice.

Asuka giggled out loud, but stifled it when the cook glanced over at us. After a moment she regained her composure and continued. "And I think some of the shop-keepers were nice to me because they could tell that I was getting things for Academy classes."

"Why would that make a difference?" I asked. Some of the subtleties of hidden village life were just beyond me. The old man had avoided cities like the plague before he was captured.

"When a shinobi takes on dangerous missions, the pay is often lots and lots of money," Asuka explained. One thing I always appreciated about her is that she never got an attitude when explaining about things I'd never experienced before. She neither pitied me nor condescended, which was nice. "The tough missions can only be done by elite ninjas for lots of ryou, but even middle-level missions can get you a good bit of money."

"So if we graduate and become ninjas…" I said as the light began to dawn.

"You'll have lots and lots of money to spend," she confirmed in a whisper as the smiling cook brought a pair of steaming bowls to the front. We thanked him again.

"I can't wait until we can afford to eat here every night," I said with a smile. I wasn't really exaggerating that much, either.

Over the years, I've sort of become used to getting stared at by all sorts of people, starting with the guards I caught glimpses of when they left food or removed the waste pot from our cell. For whatever reason, the Biju imprisoned within my seal wreaked greater changes

on my appearance than anyone else. Naruto got the whiskers from the Kyuubi, and Asuka was apparently unmarked… though I wonder if she was born with hair that red.

In any event, I understand that I'm a little odd looking, and I've eventually come to accept it. But it took a while before I grew accustomed to being stared at. By large numbers of people. All at once.

So being presented to the class by Iruka-sensei was not a comfortable way to start the morning. Asuka was equally nervous, so I didn't feel like a complete wimp.

We'd even gone out of our way to make ourselves presentable. We were wearing our new clothes, black long-sleeved shirt and pants for me, with a dark green tunic belted on over that, and dark red shorts and tunic for Asuka. She wanted freedom of movement for taijutsu, but while my shirt and pants were cut loose, they also covered as much of my unusually pale skin as possible.

I'd both shortened and evened up the length of my hair with a kunai the night before, and now wore it tied back with a spare leather cord. I wasn't going to be able to hide my eyes forever, and it would also help if I didn't wear my hair like that snake-sannin-son-of-a-bitch.

But all our efforts seemed to have come to naught as our classmates silently stared at us after Iruka introduced us. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Asuka's jaw muscles clenching.

"Great, we're about to graduate and we're joined by a snake-freak and a runt," a voice said from the back of the class.

Asuka blinked and I could see the color rising in her cheeks. She *was* the shortest person in the room, primarily because of her age I imagined, but she didn't seem to appreciate being reminded of it.

I decided to respond before she did, for obvious reasons. "I'd rather be a freak than a buffoon," I drawled.

The other students all froze in their seats.

"Jaboru!" Iruka snapped from behind me. "That is not a proper greeting, especially for someone that fancies they are ready to become a genin!"

"Sorry, Sensei," the voice replied, and I zeroed in on its source. A large, hulking boy sat near the back of the room, barely able to fit behind the desk.

Iruka scowled and gestured curtly toward a pair of seats near the front of the class. Isn't funny how those are always the last seats to fill?

As we sat down and opened our bags, a low voice was heard behind us. "Welcome to the class, Asu-chibi and Snake-boy," Jaboru murmured scornfully.

Asuka's face was rigid, but she relaxed when I touched her wrist. The boy was quiet enough that Iruka hadn't heard as he was writing on the chalkboard. As the instructor began his lecture, I took a piece of paper and folded back a corner. On one side I wrote a few sentences in large type. When the teacher looked away, I placed the improvised sign on my back with the folded tag hooked into the neck of my tunic to secure it.

"I am Hikaru, this is Asuka to my right. Feel free to make up stupid names if you can't pronounce three syllable words," it said.

The students directly behind us began snickering, which turned into fits of coughing when Iruka frowned at them. Soon, other students were craning to see what was written on my back, and after a while most of the class seemed to have gotten a laugh out of it.

The lecture on recent history was fairly absorbing, and I had to remind myself to take notes. Iruka wouldn't be making me repeat his words back to him until they were engraved in my memory. I needed to learn this on my own.

The period after the lecture was spent outside. Unfortunately, we were practicing with throwing weapons. My aim was only slightly better than yesterday. I knew I just needed to practice the proper motions until the muscle memory began to set in, but that didn't make the snickering any easier to hear. At least Asuka didn't suck as badly. She gave me an apologetic look as we went back inside, but I just shrugged at her.

The chakra control exercises seemed interesting at first, until I realized that was all we were doing for that hour. I was doing stuff like this with the old man years ago. Iruka-sensei wasn't kidding when he said I had good control for someone my age. He didn't even bother to ask me to demonstrate when he reached our table. I spent most of the hour working with Asuka instead. When she struggled too hard and grew frustrated, I'd feel a warning pulse of heat radiating from her. It wasn't too intense, and I doubt anyone more than a few feet away would notice, but I still tapped her knee whenever it happened. My best guess is that the Biju sealed up inside of her reacted when she became emotional… but everything was guesswork where those damn things were concerned.

However, it meant that Asuka needed to gain control of her emotions if she wanted to avoid accidentally setting things on fire. Things like her blanket, our apartment, me… You know important things, like the village of Konoha, or even the forest we saw on the way here. If being nice could prevent third degree burns—or worse --I was more than willing to reassure her.

Lunch was some cold rice balls and a few minutes laying on the grass and looking up at the clouds. I never really did get tired of looking at the sky, which wasn't too surprising, I guess. Asuka ended up talking to some of the other kunoichi's in our class, so I was by myself when a large shadow fell over me.

"For someone who can't throw a kunai, you have a lot of attitude," Jaboru growled.

I quickly pulled my knees up to my chest, then kicked downward, snapping to my feet in a kip-up. My back was toward the enormous boy, which was rather rude, not to mention tactically unwise. I slowly turned toward him and cocked my head. "My old teacher didn't do much with weapons," I said with a shrug.

"He must have been pretty pathetic," Jaboru sneered.

Through a fair bit of teeth-grinding, I managed not to tear him a new one. "Maybe, maybe not. He didn't emphasize weapons, but I *do* know the difference between a five-element seal and a six-point binding pattern."

As he struggled to digest this, the bell rang to summon us back to class. I wondered how wise it was to mouth off to a boy whose forearms were nearly as wide as my torso.

I found out the answer during the last period of the day, when we went back outside to practice taijutsu. We did some warm-up exercises, which actually felt good. This was followed by some katas, which I had to pick up awkwardly as I went along, and then some free sparring. Asuka and I partnered up immediately. She was actually a handful since she was so fast. The fighting styles we'd picked up from our previous instructors were also quite different, so it was a lot of work anticipating which direction she would attack from next.

We broke apart for a moment to catch our breath when a thick finger poked me in the shoulder blade. "Let's see what you got," Jaboru said with a smirk.

Asuka frowned, but I just shrugged and dropped into a ready stance. No sooner had I done that than he exploded forward, crashing his fist into my jaw. My feet left the ground and I landed on my back almost ten meters away.

Some of the other students were looking at Jaboru, who just spread his hands and smiled. "He looked like he was ready," he simpered, "I

thought the big hot shot could take a hit, but I was wrong."

My jaw felt numb, but if I spoke slowly enough I could still be heard. "I'm fine," I said as I stood up, making a show of dusting off my pants. As I stepped back toward the hulking boy, I felt a twinge. He was doing something with chakra. "You're using chakra," I said quietly, as I dropped into my stance again.

"So?" Jaboru grunted. "Just because you can't doesn't mean I should take it easy on you."

"No," I replied with a smirk. "I was being nice because I thought you couldn't."

The big idiot snarled and charged at me again. He slammed his right fist into the side of my head. If he hadn't been funneling chakra into his arm, I doubt he could have caught a cold with that swing.

Still, there was a lot of momentum behind it. However, my feet stayed planted on the ground, thanks to the chakra I was circulating in them. I twisted, bending backward at the waist and knees. My back arched so far that my right elbow actually touched the ground for an instant.

Then my whole body snapped back like one large, irritable spring. My legs and spine straightened like a whip cracking and my chakra-laced fist slammed into Jaboru's center of mass, blowing him backward off his feet. He hit the ground hard, and it took him a moment to get up. When he shook his head to clear it, I was leaning over him with my hand extended. He grudgingly took it and I helped him to his feet.

"How…?" he asked. He must have bounced hard enough to knock all the arrogance out of him.

"You're bigger than I am," I said quietly, "but I have more chakra."

Jaboru nodded warily and we switched partners again. The brown-haired kid with his hair in a top-knot was fairly tentative in his attacks after watching what just happened, but I let my chakra subside and just worked with him normally.

By the time the last bell rang, I was bruised and tired. Working with unusual taijutsu styles meant that a lot of blows were slipping past blocks, on both sides. Asuka and I were dead tired as we trudged home. After only a couple of days, our apartment was already feeling like a refuge of sorts. Maybe it was just because it was 'ours', after a fashion. Are people naturally territorial or what?

The fifty pound bag of rice seemed like a good idea when we purchased it… we needed to make our food money last. But Asuka was getting a little tired of plain rice for the third meal in a row. I agreed with her that we needed to look for opportunities to earn a little extra money, but there was nothing I could think of at the moment to try. Most of the simple tasks I came up with were usually reserved for D-ranked genin missions, according to Asuka. Konoha might do things differently, but since they did follow the standard rank system, it was unlikely.

After racking our brains for a while, we decided to call it an early night. As usual, Asuka was lightly snoring a minute after her shoulder nudged me. I stared up at the shadowed ceiling for a little longer, waiting for my mind to quiet down a little.

I was awakened by a muffled racket from hallway, followed by some muttered swearwords. I shook Asuka awake this time, wary of deliberately pissing her off. We made our way in our sleepwear to the hallway. I noted that the loose shorts and t-shirt she wore were appropriate for a little taijutsu if necessary.

When I warily stuck my head out into the hallway, I had to bite back some curse words. The lock on Uzumaki Naruto's door had already been defeated, and someone was messing around in there with the lights off. I heard another crash and took off down the hall. Inside the apartment, a shadowy figure was tearing at the wall.

"Leave his stuff alone!" I snarled, grabbing at its shoulder as I cocked my fist back. That earned me a quick elbow in the gut, but I didn't let go as I fell back. I spun as I dropped and sent the figure tumbling to the floor. However, instead of rolling into the wall head first, the figure came up in a low crouch. I saw the glint of a kunai in one hand.

"Katon: Burning Torchlight!" Asuka called out from the doorway. A small ball of fire sparked into being above her open palm, dimly lighting the room.

The first thing I noticed was the bright orange jacket and pants. The second was the golden yellow hair. The third was the vibrant blue eyes. The whiskers didn't register until a lot later.

"You're Uzumaki Naruto," I said.

"Yeah," the boy said. "Now who are you and what the hell are you doing in my apartment?"

Konoha Ninja Academy

Chapter Three

"Er, I'm Hikaru and that is Asuka. We're your new neighbors," I said carefully. Given what I'd heard, there was no telling what kind of emotional baggage this kid was toting around. Just my luck to get my clock cleaned by someone I wanted to befriend.

"We thought people were breaking into your apartment again," Asuka added. "They broke the door down the other night, so Hikaru beat them up."

Naruto frowned. "I thought that door looked a little different."

"The ANBU replaced it. Why were you fumbling around in the dark?" I asked.

"Oh," Naruto said. "They turned off the electricity again. At least I didn't have any milk in the refrigerator this time."

I frowned as a drop of sweat inched down my bare back. The room was stifling. "Okay, this place is like an oven with no air conditioning. You want to sleep on our couch tonight?"

Naruto's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I mean, you don't mind?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said. "Besides, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Sure, sure," he said as he dashed into the bedroom and returned with a sheet and a lumpy pillow. Asuka extinguished her jutsu as we exited the apartment and Naruto locked up.

The air was definitely cooler back at our place. Asuka led Naruto to one end of the couch and sat him down. He seemed more amused

at her bossiness than anything else. She sat down on the opposite end of the couch while I pulled up a chair.

"So…" Naruto said, peering at Asuka, "are you shinobi?"

I nodded. "We will be," I said. "We should be graduating from the Academy pretty soon now."

Naruto frowned. "That means you were in the class behind mine," he said, "but I don't remember seeing you there. And I'd definitely remember you with those weird eyes," he concluded, rather tactlessly, I might add.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Asuka wince.

"Are they a jutsu?" he asked after a moment.

"No," I grated. "They've always been this way."

"Awww," he pouted. "I was hoping they were. That way, you could teach me, and I could use it to scare the crap out of Sasuke!"

That brought me up short. No one ever said they *wanted* eyes like mine. "We're transfer students. We came from Iwakagure."

Naruto smiled. "Really? Did you learn a lot of cool jutsus there?"

"Not really," I said. He really did have a one-track mind. "I was a prisoner, as was my sensei."

"How could you be a prisoner?" Naruto asked, outraged. "If you haven't graduated yet, then you're just a kid. What did you do?"

"I didn't *do* anything, Naruto," I growled. "I was imprisoned for what I *am* ."

Naruto just frowned in confusion.

"You'd better show him or we'll be up all night," Asuka said, sighing and rubbing her temples.

"Why don't you show him?" I challenged her. Sometimes her bossiness rubbed me the wrong way. Just a little bit, anyway.

"Because I'm a *girl* ," she said in a withering tone, implying that Naruto wasn't the only idiot in the room.

I sighed and stood up. I suppose since I don't sleep with a shirt on, it'd be easier for me to do it than to argue. I guessed she was feeling modest, but her seal was on her stomach. It wasn't like it was on her… well, never mind. I circulated some chakra through the seal, making it glow green for a moment. "Does this look familiar?" I asked.

Naruto's mouth dropped open.

"I have Hachimata, the eight-tailed dragon sealed inside me the same way you have the Kyuubi," I continued in a level tone, resisting the urge to make any remarks; this would be difficult enough as it was. "Asuka has one was well, but we're not sure which one was bound to her."

Naruto's mouth closed with an audible snap. "It always comes back to the Kyuubi, doesn't it?" he asked in an aggrieved tone.

"Perhaps," I agreed. "My sensei was imprisoned because he refused to break my mind so the Tsuchikage could use me as a weapon." I saw Asuka flinch, but I couldn't gloss over this and still make my point. "What they did to her was nearly as bad," I added. She looked at me sharply. "Before he died, the old man told me about you and how the Fourth Hokage imprisoned the Kyuubi within you, saving the village. He figured if there was any place someone like me would have a fair chance, it would be where a Jinchuuriki was the village hero."

Naruto opened his mouth to protest, but I raised my hand to forestall him. "I know, I know. The villagers don't see you that way. For once, it seems the old man wasn't cynical enough… But still, you are free, and allowed to be a shinobi. Asuka and I as well. That's a better deal than we'd have most places." It might be deflating to realize, but he really did have a better deal here – even if knowing that did limit his potential for teenage angst.

Naruto stuck his chest out. "It doesn't matter how they act now," he declared. "I'll be Hokage some day, and then everyone will have to recognize me!"

Asuka and I just stared at Naruto for a moment after his grandiose announcement. I opened my mouth to make a smart remark, but something gave me pause. He really believed it, and for just a second, so did I.

Now, ordinarily, I don't believe in much. The old man once said, "When you are in prison, hope is the deadliest of poisons." Just a little can corrode your soul over time, leaving it poisoned and driving you mad. For Naruto to believe in his childish proclamation so strongly as to move *me* …? Such charisma was usually the province of madmen, visionaries, and true leaders. While Naruto seemed relatively sane, despite his taste in clothes, I don't think he had the brainpower to be a visionary either. That left only one option.

"Well," I said slowly. "If you become Hokage, then I imagine Konoha will be an even better place to live for people like me and Asuka." I turned to my room mate. "What do you say, Asuka? Think we should help him become Hokage?"

"I'd like that," she said with a smile. Were her eyes a little shiny too?

I turned back to Naruto. "We're in, oh future-Hokage-sama."

I doubt I'll ever forget the look on his face.

It was a while after that before we got everyone settled down and asleep. I had to remind Naruto and Asuka that we had class in the morning. Naruto was pleased to discover we were working with Iruka-sensei as well, but agreed that falling asleep in class was a bad idea if you didn't like being lectured.

Morning came all too fast, seemingly about twenty seconds after I closed my eyes. Asuka and I bustled around the apartment, getting ready for classes. I got some rice cooking while she ducked into the shower. Naruto was just stirring on the couch.

"When do you have to be up?" I asked as he looked blearily about the room.

"Not for a while yet," he yawned and then sat up, scratching lazily at his hair. "My sensei is always *hours* late for team meetings, so I don't bother showing up on time anymore."

Great. More Leaf weirdness.

"All right," I said. "We have to go soon, so I'll leave the spare key with you. Lock up when you leave."

He nodded, but didn't say anything as he took the key from my hand. Finally, he frowned. "Hey, is Asuka like your sister or something?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "But she helped me escape. I owe her a lot."

"But you two sleep in the same room," he said, making a face. "Isn't that kind of… weird?"

I bit back the first three things I wanted to say. "Look," I snapped. "She had a *very* bad time getting out of Iwakagure, and she has terrible nightmares about it. If I'm not there to wake her up when she's having one… bad things happen. And while we're on the topic, you want to be careful about startling that girl. She's really good with

fire jutsus, and I won't be held responsible if you surprise her and she lights you up."

Naruto's face turned red and he looked away, embarrassed. I felt a sudden urge to smash my forehead against the wall. Embarrassing him was, of course, a simply brilliant way of getting to know him. I needed to learn how to curb my defensiveness where Asuka was concerned. Even if I did feel guilty about what happened, I had no business taking it out on someone else. I sighed. Time to leaven the stick with some carrot.

"But you do bring up a good point. We have a spare bedroom right now, so I'll talk to Asuka when we're at school today. If you move in with us, we can share expenses and maybe the villagers will stop messing with you so much," I said, looking down as I picked at my nails. I decided not to mention it being a bit less lonely for him, from what Iruka had told us. Guys don't talk about stuff like that.

"Or they might start messing with you two as well," Naruto pointed out.

"Hey, we're in this together, aren't we future-Hokage-sama?" I replied with a smirk.

"Oi! You make us sound like the Konohamaru Corps!" he said with a laugh.

Of course, I had to get him to explain that one, and soon learned about the Third Hokage's reality-challenged grandson. "All right, Naruto-sama," I agreed. "But if you call me Udon, I'll have to get you."

"And how would you do that?" He asked in a superior tone, holding his nose up in the air. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the corners of his mouth twitching upwards.

"Evil masterminds always find a way," I said in a low, dramatic voice.

We were both laughing like lunatics when Asuka came out of the bathroom, dressed for school and rubbing a towel through her short, damp hair. "Boys!" she said in a despairing tone as she hung up the towel and headed out the door with her bag.

"Wait up, Asuka-chan," I called out as I staggered to my feet and followed.

Classes were a little less tense that day. For the most part, people seemed to be getting used to us, so we weren't constantly the center of attention. I was still a little nervous in unfamiliar social situations, not that I would ever admit it. On the other hand, Asuka seemed to notice when I was out of my depth and helped smooth things over. She didn't make a big deal out of it… she just took charge when I had no idea how to respond to something like a shopkeeper haggling, or a classmate asking a question. Later, I would ask her what the hell was going on, and she would fill me in. I tried not to dwell on that too much.

Of course, our nice, stress-free day couldn't last forever. During our lunch break, we quickly ate our increasingly bland rice balls. Then we spent the rest of the time in the training yard, leaning back on a bench, staring up at the sky, and plotting ways to make some ryou. Staring up at the clouds for long periods of time is one of my more wholesome vices. Considering how I grew up, I figure I'm entitled to admire the sky just a bit. Endless space over my head was still a slightly intoxicating concept.

My contemplations were disturbed by a trio of prospective genin from our class who walked over and began speaking without any introductions. Their apparent leader was a boy with a prominent scar on his cheek that gave him a permanent squint. "My father is ANBU," he informed me. He must consider that to be highly important, given the way he said it.

"Good for him. Why do they always wear those masks?" I asked.

He didn't answer my question when he replied. "He said you came from Iwakagure!" he accused. Maybe he didn't know about the masks. Was it classified information? Or did they all have facial deformities?

"That's right," I answered, sitting up. Asuka sat up as well.

"My father fought the Rock Ninja in the war!" the husky boy on his left blustered.

"Mine too!" added the skinny, pock-marked kid on the right.

Asuka looked very uncomfortable.

"Good for them!" I snarled, thrusting my head forward. "I hope they killed a lot of the rotten bastards!"

The boys stared at me with wide eyes, stunned at my vehemence.

"What?" I asked. "Did your ANBU daddy forget to mention that we were *fleeing* from Iwakagure? Or that we had to kill a handful of Rock-nins ourselves in order to escape? Or are you just congenitally stupid?" I glared at them, my upper lip curled back to expose my slightly-larger-than-normal canines.

The boys backed away as I shifted my weight forward and acted like I was getting ready to leap up from the bench and wreak some havoc. "Beat it," I spat.

They fled.

Asuka turned and glared at me. "You scared them."

"Yep."

"You liked it!" she accused.

I shrugged. "Yeah. So?"

"You didn't have to do that," she said, crossly.

"They were irritating me, so I made them go away," I said, then paused. "I did forget to mention that you got more of the enemy than I did. Sorry about that."

"That isn't what I meant," she insisted. "You can't always go around bullying people like that."

"Well, I thought they were bothering you too," I said defensively.

Her eyes narrowed. "Would they have irritated you so much if I wasn't here?" she asked.

I shrugged and decided to go with the truth. Given her mood, it was probably safer. "I don't know. What do you think about having Naruto move in with us? He can use the spare bedroom."

"That would be nice," she said quickly smiling. And then she frowned just as quickly. "You changed the subject on me," she accused.

"Yes. Yes, I did," I admitted with a smirk.

"That wasn't very nice," she shot back.

"I'm not very nice," I said, widening my smirk.

Asuka scowled. "I'm not a little baby you have to protect," she pouted, folding her arms and looking away. I declined to inform her how sticking her lower lip out like that made her look even younger.

"No," I agreed, "you are not a little baby. But you are my friend." I scowled as her head snapped back around and she looked down, cheeks reddening. The bell marking the end of the period saved me from any further embarrassing revelations.

Of course, my little performance had consequences. By the time it had circulated through the gossip network, the bare facts of our journey mutated into something unrecognizable. Not only had we

defeated hundred of enemies to reach Konoha, but Asuka was now a fugitive princess! (Which actually wasn't too far from the truth, now that I think about it.) And me? I was a demon of the underworld that she'd tricked into becoming her faithful manservant. Given that I did all the cooking in our apartment, that part hit a little close to home.

Of course, all this rumor-mongering made Asuka suddenly one of the most popular girls in the class, despite her being a little younger. Nobody seemed to *really* believe I was a demon… not out loud, anyway. But I didn't have anyone eager to hassle us after that, so maybe it was worth the embarrassment. Did these kids read too many fanciful stories? Or were they fed too much sugar as toddlers? Or was this all just another example of that all-pervading Leaf Weirdness™?

And did I really even want to know the answer to that question?

Naruto was waiting for us when we got home, his mission that day involving a rather disastrous demonstration of how *not* to weed a garden. I wasn't sure I really believed that a hidden grass missing-nin gave him that black eye though.

His contusions, both to body and pride, were forgotten when I asked if he still wanted to move in. Between his enormous smile and the fact that he was bouncing from foot to foot in his eagerness, Asuka couldn't stop giggling.

As we helped him pack, I moved his bed away from the wall and saw a slip of paper flutter to the ground. I picked it up and examined it for a moment, only to have Naruto snatch it from my fingers.

"Be careful!" he cautioned, "that's an explosive tag!"

"That?" I asked, and let out a snort. "The ink is smudged, the characters are poorly executed, and half the symbols are mis-aligned. I'd be amazed if it even went off."

Naruto scowled and looked away. "It's all I can afford," he muttered sullenly.

I winced. One of these days I was going to learn how to watch my mouth. I'd probably be elected Iwakagure's Most Popular Shinobi first. Well, time to make amends. "Tell you what," I said in what I hoped was a jaunty tone, "after we get your stuff moved, I'll make you some good ones."

"You can *make* explosive tags?" Naruto asked in an amazed voice, his pique instantly forgotten. In fact, he looked like he'd just been told it was raining ramen outside.

I nodded. "I should be able to. The theory behind the design isn't that complex."

"You are the greatest room mate ever!" Naruto said happily.

"I thought my title was Head Minion and Evil Plotter?" I asked.

Naruto rubbed at his jaw, even though he was way too young to start shaving yet. Asuka later explained that he'd probably seen it in a movie. "If you can make explosive tags, then I'll have to promote you."

"You are too generous, Naruto-sama," I said sarcastically.

"I've already carried over my share of his stuff," Asuka announced. "So stop standing around talking." Her voice had taken on a scolding tone, but her green eyes were practically dancing with laughter as Naruto and I quickly picked up stacks of clothes, scrolls, and weapons. There were also several crates of something called 'cup-ramen'. I assumed it was edible—the ramen that is, not the cup.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to move Naruto's belongings down the hall and into the spare bedroom. He was just going to leave everything in a huge pile, but Asuka was having none of it.

"If you want to live with other people," she said, tapping her foot and narrowing her eyes, "you can't be messy."

Naruto started to scowl, but then he cracked a mischievous smile and brought his hands together to form a seal. I was suddenly aware of a rather large amount of chakra being hurriedly molded. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Naruto yelled, and suddenly his room was extremely crowded – between the three of us and an extra half-dozen Narutos.

I was wondering what use the illusionary duplicates would have when I saw one open a drawer. "Those things are solid?" I asked. No wonder that took so much chakra.

Naruto nodded proudly. "It's my ultimate technique!" he announced.

"Good," Asuka said, her eyes dancing at this little revelation. "Then you can do all the picking up around here, and I will do the laundry while Hikaru cooks."

"What?" Naruto asked, outraged.

"Just have your little friends do it," she said dismissively. A couple of the bunshins made rude gestures at her. "Be nice!" she warned, "or I might get carried away when I dry your clothes. I think you'd look better in brown than orange anyway. Right, Hikaru?"

"Er, that seems like a fair division of labor," I said carefully, trying to think of something to say before I was either pummeled or toasted.

Naruto shot me a betrayed look and started to open his mouth.

"Do you want to stand around and argue, or do you want me to make you some tags?" I asked quickly.

Naruto grabbed my elbow and dragged me out of his room, while his slightly disgruntled-looking clones continued to put things away. I'm pretty sure one of them flipped me off as I left.

I paused for a moment in the living room to grab my school bag, and then led the two spectators into the kitchen. Sitting down at the table, I removed several items from the bag.

With a sharp kunai, it required less than a minute to divide a single sheet of unmarked paper into four equal-sized strips. I uncapped a fresh bottle of ink, and then used the point of the kunai to cut a deep slit in the pad of my thumb. Naruto gasped, but Asuka just stared silently as I squeezed the cut over the bottle of ink, letting a thin stream of dark red dribble into the even darker pigment.

When I judged that I'd spiked the ink with enough of my blood, I pushed the edges of the cut together while I got up from the table. As usual, the cut healed almost instantly, before I even started to wash my hands or clean off the kunai. After drying the blade, I cradled the bottle of blood-spiked ink in my hands and began to push my chakra into it. This continued for several minutes, during which Naruto began to fidget, and then finally got up from the table.

After the blood-spiked ink had absorbed as much chakra as it could hold, I carefully held the bottle up to the light. The chakra-impregnated ink seemed to glimmer slightly under the kitchen lights. As Naruto fiddled with the stove, I took out my brushes and dipped the thickest one into the ink.

It wasn't like this was that difficult… I'd practiced these designs hundreds of times, only using a hunk of my own hair as the brush. Still, I almost botched the first tag. I wasn't entirely used to writing on a surface that wasn't fixed in place – like the stone floor of our cell. But I was able to hold the tag along the edges with the fingers of my left hand while I drew the chakra-storing seals with bold strokes.

My confidence increased as the tag slowly took form under my brush. When I finished the edging, I immediately started on the next one. I didn't want to give the prepared ink time to dry out. The first tag was nearly dry as I finished the last one, capped the ink bottle, and straightened up. Naruto's attention was wholly focused on the flimsy-looking container of cup-ramen in his hands. (Asuka later

identified the strange white material as the mystical compound 'Styrofoam'. Supposedly, no one knew where it came from.)

Asuka was similarly focused on her own cup. I frowned as I stood up to go rinse out my brushes. Being upstaged by reconstituted noodles was bad for my ego.

On the other hand, there was a third cup waiting in front of my chair when I sat back down again. Naruto grinned over at me. "Got to eat it while it's hot!" he told me. At least he was generous with his obsessions, and it was quite good. Not as savory as the fresh stuff from Ichiraku's, but tasty nonetheless.

By the time I'd drunk the last of my broth, the first tag was completely dry. I carefully picked it up and forced my chakra into the storage seals in the center of the design. When it felt 'full', I lightly brushed my fingertips across the design and primed the seals. The next time it was directly touched with chakra, the storage seals would begin to break down. After precisely five seconds, the chakra stored within them would be released. If I'd constructed it properly, the 'fire' and 'concussion' seals would convert this chakra into a small explosion. I repeated this process with the other three tags and then stretched again. Naruto was eyeing the tags spread before me on the table. I handed him one.

He gingerly turned it over in his hands, eyeing it with some care. "Will this really work?" he asked bluntly.

I grinned at him. "Want to test it out?"

And that was how the three of us found ourselves at one of the training grounds well after dark. Asuka was a little less enthusiastic about this, but maybe it was just a guy thing. Naruto was chuckling to himself as he told us to stay still. He ran across the clearing and stuck the tag onto the trunk of a tree. I'd warned him that I wasn't exactly sure how strong the explosion would be. I rather carefully avoided mentioning that these were the first real tags I'd made. Old

man's lessons had, by necessity, been limited to theory on many subjects.

Naruto lightly slapped the tag and began to run back toward us as fast as he could. He was most of the way back when the tag detonated and the shockwave sent him tumbling into us. Asuka and I staggered backwards, surprised. Of course, I managed to trip over a tree root and sit down hard with a thump.

On the other side of the clearing, the tree was completely *gone* - as were its immediate neighbors. In their place was a ten foot wide crater and above that a huge, green-tinged ball of fire rose into the night sky.

We were all silent for a moment after climbing back to our feet. "I'll make you another batch of tags," I promised a wide-eyed Naruto. "I can make them a lot smaller."

"Nah, these are fine," he assured me, still staring at the smoking crater, a smile spreading across his face.

Maniac.

Between Naruto's giddiness and Asuka's worries about getting into trouble, it took us a while after we made it back to the apartment for us to settle down for the night. Even after we went to bed, sleep eluded me for the longest time, leaving my mind to wander.

I suppose part of this was due to the satisfaction of seeing my tag work so well. It felt good to know that I was able to put the old man's teachings to good use. He'd only been able to lecture me on the theory, but I still got it right the first time. According to Naruto, they didn't even teach tag-making at the Konoha Ninja Academy, which got me wondering.

Then it hit me. When the Tsuchikage's men were looking for someone to complete his secret weapon, they'd searched Earth

Country for the *best* seal-master they could find. That had been the old man. And he'd spent nearly every waking moment of almost ten years teaching me everything he could. That was both a humbling and a scary thought. And being scared and humble was not my cup of tea, either.

I wrenched my thoughts back to the present. The tag Naruto detonated was nearly an entire order of magnitude stronger than I expected it to be. That and the odd green hue made me wonder if Hachimata's chakra was helping me. The seal on my stomach was supposed to help convert the Biju's chakra into something I could use, and I wasn't nearly as tired after making those tags as the old man warned I would be.

This brought up the matter of economics. Naruto was an active-duty genin with steady work completing missions, yet he said he couldn't afford better than that crappy tag I'd found behind his bed. Were tags that expensive? If making them really exhausted the chakra of the creator, it was possible. That meant I might have an opportunity to bring in some ryou.

I smiled. Asuka had helped me adjust to many aspects of life outside of my prison cell. She subtly corrected the worst of my social miscues, patiently answered my questions, and did a lot of other small things that I won't bother to include in this narrative. There are a lot of things people outside my situation don't really appreciate.

Have you ever stopped to wonder at the miracle of modern technology known as the flush toilet? I know it's something people use every day, most likely without even thinking twice about it. But from the perspective of someone who had to use a nasty-smelling bucket their entire life, it's damned miraculous.

Almost as miraculous as the way my mind wanders when I'm trying to sleep.

But for all of Asuka's experience as a member of the Tsuchikage's household, she'd been the youngest of a very privileged family. As

such, she had little knowledge of how the common people made a living. Hell, I never had a hot meal until I came to Konoha, but I ended up doing the vast majority of the cooking. I swear that girl could burn water without using a jutsu…

Even though I hadn't spoken aloud, Asuka stirred restlessly on the mattress. I gently nudged her and she settled back down again. Maybe her mind was wandering as much as mine was.

I rolled onto my side, trying to get comfortable. If I could sell tags that I made, we might make enough money to live a little more comfortably. Not only could we buy food to go with the plain rice, but I'd feel better if we weren't entirely dependent on the Hokage's largesse. And I only needed to make enough to keep us going until graduation. Once Asuka and I were genin as well, performing missions for pay should be more than enough to support the three of us.

That was a comforting thought. As our future seemed to become more secure in my mind, Asuka rolled over until her shoulder was pressing into my back. Despite the distractions, my mind finally decided to pack it in and let me sleep.

The following morning, I made a special point of arriving at school well before class started. Iruka was there as well, going over his lesson plans.

"Ah, sensei?" I asked.

"Yes, Hikaru?" he said with a smile. How the hell anyone could be so chipper first thing in the morning was beyond me. Maybe he took soldier pills or something.

"Are we going to be covering explosive tags soon?"

"Yes," Iruka confirmed. And, like the teacher he was, he proceeded to explain why. "We started covering them right at the end a few

years back after some… incidents. There were a few students that liked to pull pranks, and once they learned about tags, they began using small ones to set traps for each other. The building maintenance budget skyrocketed."

I winced and nodded. "I can see where that would be a problem," I agreed. "Do we bring our own tags?"

Iruka shook his head. "No, you don't need to buy your own. I'll be going out this weekend and picking some up for the entire class."

I smiled. "I'll charge you twenty percent below the going rate," I promised.

Iruka frowned. "Hikaru," he said in a disappointed voice. "I can't bring stolen materials into my classroom. And if the Hokage found out, you could-"

"Not stolen," I said sharply.

Iruka looked puzzled. "Then how? Did you bring some from-?"

"I'll make them," I said, smiling again.

As expected, Iruka's mouth dropped open. "You can make them?"

I shrugged. "My old sensei was a seal master, and he taught me a lot. Why don't you cover it in class?"

Iruka shook his head. "Hikaru, that's considered a very advanced skill, especially for genin. I'm not sure it would be right for you to-"

"Tell you what," I interrupted, "Tomorrow is Friday. I'll bring in some samples for you to examine. I'll make an assortment of sizes and we can set off a few after school and you can pick which size you want to use. I'll make them over the weekend and deliver them to you on Monday, for twenty percent less than whatever you normally pay."

Iruka was silent for a moment. "Why are you so eager to earn money, Hikaru?" he asked. "If you two don't have enough, I can talk to the Hokage."

Now it was my turn to shake my head. "I'd rather not have more charity," I said. "Besides, Naruto moved in with Asuka and me last night, and we can't let him pay for all the food, can we?"

Iruka rubbed at the scar across the bridge of his nose. "He'd probably do it without thinking twice," the chuunin said quietly. Then he straightened and looked me in the eye. "Bring your samples tomorrow. If they pass inspection, we'll set off a few to gauge them and work out the details of the order. Does that sound fair?"

"Yes, sensei!" I said eagerly.

Iruka smiled. "And I'm glad you are getting along so well."

I shrugged. "I'm just getting in good with the future Hokage," I said.

Iruka's eyes widened for a moment, then he burst into laughter.

After that, class itself was almost anticlimactic. The wild rumors about Asuka (and myself) continued to multiply, and people generally left me alone. That was fine for me – I'm naturally antisocial. Asuka dealt with the attention rather well though. I suppose being raised in the Tsuchikage's household got her used to socializing with the gullible.

But Iruka's reminder in class about the approaching genin exams got me to thinking. I shared my thoughts with Asuka at lunch and she agreed.

That was why we sought out Jaboru during the taijutsu drills.

"What do you want?" he asked warily as we approached.

"We want to graduate," I answered. "I assume you do as well."

"What does that have to do with anything?" he countered.

"My taijutsu isn't going to improve from working with most of the people here," I said bluntly. "And neither is yours. That leaves us both in danger of failing."

"Oh, please," he said, rolling his eyes dramatically.

"My weapon skills suck," I admitted. "And your ninjutsu isn't much better. We both need to nail the taijutsu portion of the exam to make up for the other parts."

Jaboru stood very still for a moment before pointing his chin at Asuka. "What about her?" he asked.

"She's in the same boat as I am," I said. "She needs to spar with someone as strong as you to improve. Also, she's just as fast as I am, which you need to work against to improve."

Jaboru nodded thoughtfully, and when Iruka's whistle blew, we both settled into fighting stances.

By the end of the period, all three of us were winded and sweaty. My arms were sore from blocking those tree trunks that Jaboru called arms, but his lungs were working like a bellows. Asuka's hands were trembling from fatigue, making her scowl.

But it had also been one of the more productive training sessions we'd had yet. No one had used chakra, so we could concentrate on developing our physical abilities, and those had been sorely tested. But as we walked back inside, Jaboru gave us a quick nod before returning to sit with his friends.

As far as declarations of peace went, it wasn't much. But then again, I'd trust in need and mutual convenience a lot more than any flowery words.

We were sore enough that it was hard to concentrate on the lecture afterwards, but I think it was worth it. By the end of the day, I was mostly recovered, though Asuka was walking a little slower than usual. I ambled along at a pace to match hers, but didn't say anything. Like Naruto, I didn't want my clothes getting 'accidentally' scorched.

We were halfway home when a cheery voice called our names, "Oi! Hikaru! Asuka-chan!" I looked up and saw Naruto walking down the opposite sidewalk, accompanied by another boy, a girl, and an old man with white hair and a mask across the lower half of his face. I turned to Asuka, but she was already crossing the street to meet them. I sighed and followed her. I wasn't sure who was in charge around here, but it sure as hell wasn't me.

I sauntered after her to go and meet Naruto, and what I presumed was his team.

I wasn't really sure what to make of them. I mean, the girl had *pink* hair. What kind of ninja would want pink hair? And it really clashed with that red dress too. Between that and the orange jumpsuit, I wondered if their sensei was color-blind or something.

On the other hand, their sensei was dressed rather sedately, except for that freaky mask. And what I could see of his face above it was unlined, so he either bleached his hair or was prematurely grey. I'd bet on the former, given the preponderance of Leaf Weirdness™ I'd seen so far.

The other boy had a very serious expression on his face, no doubt the result of hours of practice in front of a mirror. His dramatically upswept hair, indicative of serious styling-gel abuse, was somewhat scorched in places, as were his shorts and over-sized t-shirt. I had some suspicions about those burns.

"Kakashi-sensei, Sakura-chan! These are my new roomies," Naruto babbled loudly at his team, "Asuka and Hikaru!" He paused. "Oh, yeah, and the crispy guy is Sasuke," he added as an afterthought.

Sakura gave Asuka a sympathetic look. Then she turned toward Naruto and shouted, "Do you have to be so loud?"

Naruto flinched back, but continued in a more reasonable voice. "But they are really cool, Sakura-chan!"

The pink-haired kunoichi rolled her eyes, as if to say, "Then why are they with you?" but Naruto didn't seem to notice.

"Asuka is really good with fire jutsus," he continued, "and Hikaru can make explosive tags!" He then turned toward me, grinning. "We practiced trap-building today, so I put those tags to good use!" he said, looking far too pleased with himself.

The dark-haired boy's eyes flickered toward Asuka when Naruto mentioned fire jutsus, but Sakura's reaction was more extreme. She rapped her knuckles across the back of Naruto's head. "That wasn't funny," she fumed, "Sasuke-kun could have been hurt!"

She missed the glare that Sasuke shot at her, but their sensei finally chimed in.

"Those tags were quite a bit stronger than usual," he agreed, "but you cannot assume your enemies will always have substandard equipment." He looked up from the orange-covered book he was reading. What the hell kind of title is "Icha Icha Paradise" anyway? Was it some kind of training manual? I mean, it looked like the two figures on the cover were fighting… I think. He leaned forward, peering at me. "I don't know you," he said.

"I doubt you would," I agreed, "unless you've been doing missions in Iwakagure."

The jonin's one visible eye sharpened its gaze, and I abruptly began to feel uncomfortable. Maybe he was a weirdo, but suddenly he was also a *scary* weirdo. I fought the urge to shove Asuka behind me, or better yet, grab her and run like hell. Struggling to keep my voice

even, I continued. "We left Earth Country and formally sought asylum from the Hokage-sama, which he granted."

That subtle pressure was suddenly gone, leaving me rather annoyed. The white-haired jonin abruptly turned and walked away.

"Sensei?" Sakura called out.

"You're dismissed for the day," he said carelessly. "I have to report to the Hokage." His nose was already buried in his book again.

Naruto snorted in amusement at his sensei, and then turned back toward us. "Hey! Want to get some ramen?" he asked.

I shook my head. "We need to save our money right now," I said. "Maybe next week-"

"My treat!" Naruto insisted, digging an enormously bloated frog-shaped wallet out of his pocket.

I scowled. I felt bad enough about accepting the Hokage's money, let alone charity from someone practically my own age. "That's okay, Naruto. We don't need to be borrowing money from you-"

He cut me off again. "Make me some more of those tags and we'll call it even," he said with a grin.

I sighed. "All right, but I'm making them smaller next time. I don't want your sensei on my case because you went and blew up your team."

"All right!" Naruto cheered. "How about you, Sakura-chan?" he asked, turning soft eyes on his team mate. I wondered if he had a crush on her or something.

Sakura looked from Naruto to Asuka, distaste warring with curiosity on her face. "I… suppose so," she said. But then she turned toward Sasuke with a hopeful look, missing Naruto's shocked but joyous expression.

The dark-haired boy pushed his hair back with a practiced toss of his head. With an inarticulate grunt, he turned and stalked off.

Sakura looked disappointed for a moment, but then she turned to Asuka and began speaking in low tones as the two of them headed off for Ichiraku's. The conversation that ensued was incredibly confusing. It jumped from boys to clothes to hair to shopping back to clothes again and then on to something they would only discuss in whispers. I had a suspicion that I really didn't want to know who or what they were discussing at that point.

Naruto just stared after them with his mouth hanging open until I nudged him with my elbow. "They're going to leave us behind," I warned him.

He began walking, but was uncharacteristically sullen. I tried to jolly him out of his mood by asking his favorite flavor of ramen.

Huge mistake.

Now, don't get me wrong. I like ramen just as much as the next shinobi, maybe even a little more. The first hot meal I ever had was a bowl of ramen, so it'll always hold a warm spot in my heart. I can really pack it away when I'm hungry too. But I was nowhere near Naruto's level. I wasn't a *connoisseur* .

It was a ten minute walk to Ichiraku's and he was still going on about seasoning combinations and broth consistency when we arrived.

Asuka (rather cleverly) grabbed one of the end stools at the counter, and Sakura sat next to her. I let Naruto pick next and he sat down next to his team mate. Unfortunately, Sakura also shifted on her stool until she was turned partially toward Asuka, pointedly ignoring Naruto. I frowned and took the last stool.

The cook bustled over, beaming at what was probably one of his favorite customers. I let Naruto order for me, since he was obviously more familiar with the menu, but I cut him off after two bowls. That's

how I ended up with a bowl of pork and a bowl of miso-flavored ramen, while Naruto had both of those and a serving of beef as well. Asuka got the crab-flavored again, while Sakura ordered hers with a vegetable broth.

The girls talked in low tones, while Naruto frowned. We mainly just listened to Sakura and Asuka talk, but I stole the occasional glance at my room mate. I made a note to make sure I kept Naruto from gambling as I watched the emotions play across his face. I revised my earlier opinion: he didn't just have a crush on the girl, he had it *bad* .

Asuka wasn't oblivious to this, and started trying to involve Naruto in the conversation as well. But Sakura soon finished her bowl and stood up. After saying goodbye to Asuka, she thanked Naruto politely before leaving… but I noticed that she never made eye contact with him.

Naruto stared after the kunoichi as she walked away, and I re-revised my previous opinion. He had it *really* bad.

But he shook himself after a few minutes, had another couple of bowls of ramen, and called it a night. We were mostly silent as we walked home in the warm twilight. But Asuka and I did exchange glances when we saw some villagers glaring at Naruto. He just seemed to ignore them though, and I pondered the Hokage's words. Stupid frigging villagers better watch their asses.

When we returned to the apartment, Naruto went directly to his room, saying he needed to organize his scrolls. I wasn't going to object if he wanted to be alone for a bit – I had tags to make for him, not to mention the test batches for Iruka to examine.

As I sat down at the kitchen table to work, Asuka boiled some water for tea. While that was about as adventurous as she was willing to get in the kitchen, I still watched her from the corner of my eye.

But nothing untoward happened and she sat down at the table with a cup of hot tea, setting its twin next to my elbow as I completed a seal. "Thanks," I said as I put my brush down and took a sip.

"He really likes her, doesn't he?" she said in little more than a whisper.

"Naruto?" I asked. "Yeah, but she doesn't seem to feel the same way."

Asuka shook her head. "No, she likes that other boy on her team, Sasuke. But he's very cold to her… and Naruto gets on her nerves."

I snorted. I wasn't even sure if this Sasuke kid had *any* use for girls. I mean, seriously, any guy who spent that much time on his hair…? "While there is a certain poetic justice there," I said with a smirk, "Sakura isn't our problem. Naruto is."

Asuka smiled. "Because he's one of us, right?"

"Right," I agreed. Asuka seemed somewhat fixated on that idea, but I wasn't going to chide her for it. She'd lost a family, of sorts, in Iwakagure, so I couldn't blame her for wanting to have a new one here. "So what do we do about it?" I asked her.

Asuka frowned. "Well, he's 'been pestering her' since they were both in the Academy. But I get the feeling that he wasn't very popular there."

I shook my head, recalling Iruka's worries. "No, he probably wasn't. If the adults all act like they hate him…"

"You saw them glaring, same as I did," Asuka whispered angrily.

"Exactly," I agreed. "The kids probably picked up on that as well. That means finding someone better for him will be difficult, if not impossible."

Asuka frowned. "I don't think Sakura is likely to change her mind. Even if Naruto becomes Hokage."

"What the heck did you two talk about?" I asked.

Asuka shrugged. "Girl stuff."

"Very informative," I growled as I returned to work on the tags. At least with seals there was a right way and a wrong way to do something, and you could tell which was which.

By the time I was nearly done, Naruto returned from his room, his normal, cheerful self. He sat down at the table to watch me work, and soon began talking about this big mission he'd been on to Wave Country…

Asuka and I lingered after class the following day, limping a little after another hard workout sparring with Jaboru. After everyone else left, I walked up to Iruka-sensei and handed him a folder I pulled out of my bag. He opened it and began to page through the sample tags I'd created as the three of us walked out to the training area behind the school.

"These look very good," he said approvingly. "But what's this one?" he asked as he pulled the largest tag out of the folder. The stiff paper was over a hand-span wide and two hand-spans long, with two large quadruple trigrams for chakra storage and a border of zodiacal symbols and lesser elemental seals to add stability to the whole. This was not a tag you wanted going off by accident.

"That's an Uzumaki Special," I said, rolling my eyes at the title. "One of Naruto's stories inspired the design, so I named it after him. It was only fair." That and he whined a lot as well. "His team had a mission to guard a bridge from enemy ninjas, so I got to thinking about demolition tags."

Iruka's eyes widened at that. "How would you arm such a thing?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Chakra wires or a Kage Bunshin with a death wish," I speculated. "But I wouldn't test it here," I warned. "We'd need a much larger training area."

Iruka shook his head and slid the tag back into the folder. "I think we can pass on that," he said calmly, which actually impressed me a bit. I was a little bit disappointed, though; I was sort of curious about how much damage it could actually do…

Of course, I'd arranged the tags in order of increasing strength, so it wasn't like there was a shortage of explosions that afternoon. Iruka tried not to show it, but he seemed to have a lot of fun using some of them to slowly reduce a partially buried boulder into scorched gravel.

Before long, I had an order for nearly two hundred explosive tags, for which Asuka and I would receive more than enough ryou to get the taste of plain rice out of our mouths.

I was eager to get started, so we headed home immediately. Asuka was a great help – mostly by keeping Naruto distracted and out of my hair while I worked at the kitchen table.

While the work was repetitive, and I suppose many might consider it tedious, it was still strangely satisfying. As I've said before, working with seals was far less ambiguous than dealing with people – particularly some of the weirdoes I'd seen lately. If you drew the design properly, it did what it was supposed to do. That was a lot more straightforward than trying to figure out how to deal with Naruto or Asuka. Neither one of them was really happy, but damned if I had a clue of what to do about it.

Added to that was the strange satisfaction of doing something I was good at. There weren't a lot of things I could truly claim to be an expert on, but this was one of them. The old man had trained me well, better than I knew. It was but one of the things I owed him for,

but perhaps putting his knowledge to good use was one way to pay him back. I know that as my hands were kept busy, my mind wandered back through the memories of his lectures.

Before I knew it, I was done.

I got up from the table and stretched… then immediately regretted it as my back cracked rather loudly. Awareness of several things I'd been putting off sent me scurrying off to the bathroom. When I returned, a glance out the window revealed that it was apparently mid-morning. I just hoped it was Saturday, and not Sunday. Naruto was sprawled on the couch, but Asuka had fallen asleep sitting at the kitchen table, her head pillowed on her forearms.

I blinked and yawned a bit, but I wasn't as tired as I expected to be… especially considering how much chakra I'd forced into those tags. But I was hungry, so I started some rice cooking and boiled water for tea.

Asuka stirred when I patted her shoulder, and then began coughing. I set a steaming cup of tea down next to her and went back to stirring the rice.

We arrived well before class Monday morning to deliver the tags. Iruka smiled when I handed him a thick sheaf of tags for the class to use. Then he handed me an envelope with the payment. For a moment, I felt like one of those lotus smugglers the old man had told me stories about.

Asuka and I bowed politely, and then sat down in our seats to wait for the other students. I carefully tucked the money into the bottom of my bag. Asuka would kill me if I lost it. Not only would that money buy some more interesting food, it also meant we could buy some more clothes. Asuka wasn't fond of having to do laundry every other night. If anything happened to the money, I'd be hearing about it until I was a chuunin – death might be preferable, now that I think about it.

My musings were cut off by the bell. Iruka started off with a reminder about the upcoming exams, and a warning that we needed to prepare if we wanted to pass with our classmates. But the class perked right up when he mentioned that they'd be covering explosive tags today.

Asuka and I kept perfectly straight faces as Iruka-sensei passed out our tags. She made a point of examining hers very closely, which I found somewhat offensive. "There's nothing wrong with them," I whispered testily.

Asuka gave me a grin, and I knew she was teasing me again. She seemed to derive an inordinate amount of satisfaction from that, which only confirmed my place in the universe: Comic relief.

I'll admit I tuned out a bit while Iruka lectured us on the theory behind tag design and how they were commonly used. His lurid descriptions of careless shinobi blowing arms and legs off with mishandled tags were certainly entertaining though.

His cautionary tales also meant that no one was too eager to go first when we went outside to practice using the tags. I rolled my eyes when Iruka called on me to go first. I suppose if I was afraid to use my own tags, I didn't have any business selling them, right?

My tag was easily secured to the handle of a kunai with a bit of wire, and then I armed the tag and threw the kunai in one motion. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that using explosive tags on your kunai meant that pin-point accuracy was no longer required. As the stump I was aiming at vanished inside a five-foot ball of greenish flames, I realized that it was nearly impossible for anyone to even see where my kunai landed. All they saw was the explosion enveloping the target, and leaving it much worse for the wear when the smoke cleared.

It just goes to show that most problems can be overcome with enough explosives.

Of course, now that I had done it, everyone assumed it was easy. With the fear fading, they all lined up in several queues to practice throwing explosive-tagged kunai at the sturdier targets available.

Inevitably after my success, the Laws of Muir Fé had to have their due. One of our queue mates, a boy named Senjiro, drastically overestimated the amount of chakra needed to arm his tag. Using too much chakra wasn't a problem, but taking too long to arm the tag was. He realized his error as the tag grew warm in his hands before he'd even pulled back to throw the kunai. In his haste to throw it, he managed to bobble it instead. The point-heavy weapon fell to the ground point-first, sticking in the turf.

Senjiro jumped backward to get clear of the imminent explosion, but he backed right into a kunoichi from another queue and they both went down in a tangle of limbs, far too close to escape serious injuries.

I'd already given Asuka a hard shove away as Senjiro jumped back, but when he and the girl went down, I found myself diving *forward* and grabbing the tag. I knew I had less than a second before it exploded, but I'd made this tag. I knew exactly how much chakra was needed to disrupt the seals on it and I poured energy into the ofuda as rapidly as I could. I felt the concussion seal let go first, and the fiery chakra-conversion seal was partially disrupted when the storage trigrams released their chakra into it.

So instead of my hand being blown off, it was enveloped in a mass of flames and blue-green chakra. I screamed as I felt the skin burning away, possibly the worst pain I'd ever felt in my life to date. But even as the scream ripped through me, the pain began to lessen as the flames spiraled upward away from my hand. The column of flame soared up into the sky and then scattered into falling embers. I tumbled to the ground, gripping my right wrist with my good hand and willing my lungs to breathe. I rolled onto my side waiting for the shock to kick in and dull some of this frigging agony for me. I looked up, not wanting to look at blackened skin anymore, and saw Asuka

sprawled on the ground from where I'd shoved her, staring at me with eyes that glowed like candle flames.

Of course, at the first sign of trouble, Iruka-sensei was probably already in motion. I saw him when he jumped *over* a knot of panicked students. He took one look at the situation, grabbed me and slung me over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

The next thing I knew, we were traveling across Konoha at a high rate of speed. From my perspective, it took a second before I realized that he was leaping from roof to roof to avoid traffic. While I appreciated his sense of urgency, I was also about to puke down the backs of his legs. Choking to death while being rushed to medical attention was just a little too painfully ironic for me.

Between the bouncing and my lack of wind, I was having trouble getting Iruka's attention, so I finally resorted to whacking him in the ribs with my good hand. He came to a sudden halt on a tile roof and eased me forward off his shoulder.

"Is the pain getting worse?" he asked worriedly. "I'll have you at the hospital in just a few more minutes, Hikaru!"

The pain in my hand was lessening, so I shook my head as my stomach settled down and my breath began to catch up with me. "Don't bother," I finally gasped. "By the time we see a doctor, he'll think you're playing a joke on him."

Iruka frowned. "Hikaru," he said quickly, "I know you don't have much money, but the hospital doesn't charge for something like this. Besides, you were seriously burned! You could lose some fingers!"

I shook my head and carefully held up the burned hand. It was definitely hurting less. I gritted my teeth and slowly began to flex the fingers. Pain flared anew as the crisped skin cracked and seared bits flaked away. Iruka made a face, but then his mouth dropped open when he saw new skin peeking out through the ruins of the old. It was raw and sensitive, but whole.

"How…?" was all he could ask.

"It's a… side effect… I guess you could say, of the condition I share with Naruto," I said, breathing shallowly and waiting for the new pain to subside.

Iruka looked thoughtful. "You still need to clean it up," he said after a moment, "but we can do that in the infirmary at the academy." He leaned forward to hoist me up again, but I held out my good hand.

"Er, could we go a little slower this time?" I asked.

I turned my hand over under the stream of warm tap water. All the bits of char and ash were gone, as was the last of the scorched flesh. I carefully dried the pinkish skin, wincing as I touched a sensitive spot.

Iruka pulled a roll of bandages from a pocket on the side of his vest and carefully wrapped my hand up. "This will remind you to take it easy," he said, "as well as delay any uncomfortable questions."

I nodded. The pain was mostly gone, except for a deep ache that ran all the way up to my elbow. I tried to increase my chakra circulation through there to speed the healing, but the pain abruptly increased, making me gasp.

"Did I wrap it too tightly?" Iruka asked, concerned.

I shook my head and described the pain.

He frowned. "What exactly did you do to prevent the tag from exploding?" he asked.

I described how I partially dismantled the conversion seals, letting the chakra escape without triggering an explosion.

Iruka nodded. "So if that chakra was just released like that, you probably have chakra burns. You likely strained the coils inside your arm as well. I was going to excuse you from taijutsu today anyway, but now I have an even better reason." He crossed his arms, looking serious. "If this is still hurting tomorrow, at all, you will accompany me to the Konoha General Hospital, where you will undergo a thorough examination by a chakra specialist." He paused. "I understand your situation, Hikaru, but the Hokage knows some trustworthy people there, and I will make sure you see one who is… discreet."

I sighed. "All right, if I'm still sore tomorrow, I'll do it."

"On the other hand," Iruka continued, "some of the students saw how severe those burns were. How do we explain this?" He rubbed at the scar across the bridge of his nose as he thought.

I was starting to worry about whether I'd be able to even take the genin exam when I recalled something Asuka had said about a prominent shinobi family in Iwakagure. "Can we just say it's like one of those bloodline things?"

Iruka nodded. "That might work. No one knows much about the Iwa bloodlines, but I've heard stories about shinobi who could heal extraordinarily fast."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Hikaru," Iruka asked after a moment, "exactly what happened that caused the accident?"

I explained about Senjiro taking too long after arming the tag and then dropping his kunai. Iruka shook his head in despair.

"Something like this happens every few years," he said, "no matter what precautions we take. I'll have to speak to him and his parents about needing to be more careful. I hate to say this, but I'm glad it wasn't the tag that malfunctioned. There's likely to be an inquiry, and

they might object to me not purchasing tags from the normal supplier as it is."

I grunted. "If they object too much, remind them that if I hadn't made that tag myself, then I wouldn't have known exactly how much chakra to use to break down the seals. I didn't have anywhere near the time to figure it out by trial and error."

Iruka smiled at me, making the scar on his nose bunch up. "That was still a brave thing you did – you could have been killed. The Hokage will be glad to hear that he made the right choice."

I rolled my eyes at his blatant exaggeration and followed him out of the infirmary and back to our classroom.

With no teacher to watch them, hardly any of the students were in their seats when Iruka opened the door. Most of them were standing around, talking or horsing around. Most of them, that is.

A dark red blur slammed into my chest, knocking me back a step. Asuka squeezed me so hard that I couldn't inhale, so I patted her back awkwardly with my good hand and wondered how long I would stay conscious. Then she just as abruptly released me and took a step back.

The tip of her index finger indented the end of my nose, and her whole body was rigid with barely-suppressed rage as she snarled at me, "How could you do something so stupid?" she asked.

I felt very conscious of all the curious eyes watching us, and willed my face not to heat up. "Can we discuss this later?" I hissed under my breath.

Asuka didn't answer, but she gave one sharp nod, jerking her head so far forward that I couldn't see her eyes anymore. Then she spun on her heel and stalked off to her seat, ignoring the stares from half the class.

I had a feeling that I wasn't going to enjoy the conversation I'd just put off.

Author's Notes:

Many thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile for their beta work!

As you can probably tell from the clues, this chapter takes place directly after the Wave Country story arc. Currently we are in the period of time between Team Seven's return and when Kakashi signed them up for the exam. The 'doing D-rank missions with Naruto annoyed as Sasuke' montage covered at least several days, possibly longer.

If you were wondering, yes, the Academy is going to graduate another class soon (a one year interval seems long, given that Naruto has failed the exam multiple times). Teams Seven, Eight, and Ten will still be considered Rookies when they enter the Chuunin exam, as they are still in their first year.

Question and answers can be found on my yahoo group, Viridian Dreams, the link for it is in my profile. I am also looking for a native Japanese speaker to answer a question or two…

Tests of All Kinds

Chapter Four

Asuka was ominously quiet as we walked home after classes. Iruka had me stand off to one side and practice katas during the taijustsu drills, but Jaboru was happy to practice with Asuka again - even after she bloodied his nose with a spinning jump kick.

Fortunately Naruto was still with his team when we reached the apartment. I didn't really need any witnesses for this anyway.

"Asuka," I said firmly as soon as the door was shut, "I am sorry if I scared you this morning. It was not my intention to do so, but I apologize anyway. But remember that we are both training to become shinobi. Even as genin we may be called on to do dangerous things. I can't promise I'll never get hurt, but I won't intentionally do anything to break my promises to you." As the old man once told me, if you are unsure of your defenses, it's sometimes better to just go on the offensive and pray for luck. I figured after nearly incinerating my hand saving that idiot Senjiro from his own clumsiness, the gods owed me a little luck for dealing with the fallout.

This was back when I believed the gods possessed some niggling sense of justice. Now, I know better.

Asuka turned toward me, her entire face trembling. I tried to find something else to say, but my mind went completely blank. Something about her tears just turns off all my higher brain functions. Probably has something to do with the day we met, and how running into me completely screwed up her life.

All right, maybe that was a little harsh. She'd already discovered that her so-called family were merely playing roles in an elaborate deception intended to manipulate her. But if I hadn't appeared when I did, she might have cried her private tears over their betrayal,

regained her composure, and bided her time before making her bid for freedom. Instead, she helped me escape. I took her with me, and then promptly got captured and beaten.

She never did say exactly what happened in that alleyway with Tetsuo after I'd been dragged off, but I suspected the worst. He hadn't survived, but that wasn't much consolation to Asuka after what had to be the worst day of her life.

I really didn't like thinking that I might have caused the runner up in that list as well.

All those thoughts passed through my mind as she launched herself forward and slammed her face into my chest. The wind was knocked out of me as her arms wrapped around my ribcage like a band of steel.

To this day I'm not exactly sure how I managed to maneuver her over to the couch while she completely broke down. I do know that it was well after dark before her tears began to slow. The front of my tunic was nearly soaked through and my legs had gone numb hours ago. Asuka wasn't a large person by any stretch of the imagination, but she was a little big for me to have sitting curled up on my lap for hours on end.

Not that I was idiotic enough to complain.

I had more that a suspicion that this wasn't just about what happened today. I just didn't have the slightest clue what to do about it. This was another area where my prior education was woefully lacking.

Asuka was only starting to wind down when I heard Naruto's key in the lock. I craned my head around as he opened the door. He looked around in confusion at the darkened living room before cautiously entering.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a quiet, worried voice that was totally at odds with his normal manner.

I explained, in as few words as possible, what happened at the Academy.

Though I was speaking as quietly as possible, the conclusion of the story still wrenched a sob from Asuka. I felt her fingers twist in the fabric of my tunic.

"You know," Naruto said after a moment, "in movies, when a woman gets upset or hysterical or something, sometimes they slap her to help her snap out of it."

"Naruto," I said through clenched teeth, "have you ever had someone rip your arm off and beat you to death with it?"

Naruto lifted his hands in a warding off gesture. "Hey, it was just an idea."

"Don't fight," Asuka murmured into my tunic, then hiccupped. After a moment she slowly let go of me and sat up. Her face was a mess. "I'm going to take a bath," she said quietly and slowly left the room without another word.

I looked back at Naruto after she left.

"Want to go spar?" he asked.

A lot of people underestimate Uzumaki Naruto. It's not hard to do, given how he acts at times. But that's the key word, you see. Acts.

Given our… unique… perspectives on his situation, Asuka and I like to think that we know him better than ninety-nine percent of Konoha. And that's true, to a degree. We *should* .

That's why it was particularly galling when I realized that I had underestimated him.

I'd thought that his offer was just an idle one. He'd witnessed an uncomfortably intense emotional scene, and been snarled at by someone who should know better. So, he offered to do something that would get us both away from 'the scene of the crime', along with relieving our boredom.

It wasn't until after we'd arrived at his favorite training area that I began to suspect the truth. Naruto hopped up onto a tree branch, formed a seal with his hands, and promptly surrounded me with several dozen clones. "Knock yourself out," he said as they converged on me in a babble of battle cries.

The next few minutes are mostly a blur in my memories. The clones weren't incredibly skilled, but there were a lot of them, and they coordinated uncannily well. I was totally on the defensive from the very start, and it was nearly a minute before I was able to counter and land a solid blow, making a clone dissipate. As it slowly sunk in that I could go all out against the bunshin, I began pushing more and more chakra into my limbs.

Time seemed to slow down a little as I warmed up and began moving faster and faster. My right hand seemed to have recovered from the chakra burns already, though my whole forearm still felt a little warm. This was especially apparent when I instinctively used chakra to boost a spear-hand strike and the greenish coronal discharge atomized the bandages around my hand. It also exploded the clone I struck, as well as one that was right behind it.

I wasn't even aware of how my grunts had changed into roars of fury until I rounded on the last ten clones. I even copied one of Asuka's moves, diving forward and somersaulting into a lunging punch that nailed the last clone.

I stopped as the smoke of its destruction wafted around me, hands at the ready in a deep stance. But no more clones appeared and I

slowly became aware of Naruto cheering from his perch.

"That was great!" he said with a wide grin as he hopped down. "You're not as fast as Sasuke-baka, but I bet you hit a lot harder."

"Why don't *you* spar me and see?" I asked with a grin that I couldn't hold back. Damn that had felt good.

Naruto shrugged. "Not until after you graduate, it's a rule. Otherwise it would be like picking on a civilian, and the Hokage doesn't like that. Technically, I'm breaking it with my bunshin, but this is just practice, right?"

I raised an eyebrow and also raised my opinion of Konoha another notch. That rule would explain why the civilians didn't seem quite as hesitant and fearful as they did in Iwakagure. Then it struck me.

I'd been a boiling stew of rage, frustration, and guilt when I left the apartment. I'd hurt Asuka, without meaning to, and opened a lot of old wounds that I suspected would be a long time healing. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do about that. She wouldn't really talk to me about it, let alone anyone else.

So Naruto brought me out here, expended Kami-knew-how-much-chakra forming clones for me to beat up, and let me get it all out of my system. I'm not sure he realized what he was doing, but I'd been completely clueless at the time. "You did this on purpose, didn't you?" I asked.

He didn't even bother to deny it. "When I had a bad day, sometimes I'd come out here and throw kunai as hard as I could. One of the trees here still shudders when I walk by."

"I can't try that method," I said. "I'd miss the tree too much and probably end up killing some defenseless animal." I shook my head ruefully. "Thanks," I added after a moment.

Naruto shrugged. "Want some ramen?"

I thought about the money we'd earned with the tags. "All right, but I'm buying this time."

I'd never regret those last four words more in my life.

The apartment was quiet when we returned. With Naruto having eaten all my pocket money, I quietly reminded myself to never underestimate his ramen capacity.

Asuka was sitting at the kitchen table with an empty cup ramen in front of her, next to her history book. I felt a stab of guilt that we hadn't come back to collect her, but then I noticed her bathrobe and the towel wrapped around her head. Maybe a quiet evening alone suited her better, all things considered.

"Did you boys have fun?" she asked quietly as she marked her page and turned toward us.

"Yeah," Naruto reported. "Hikaru put the hurt on my clones. I'd like to see him spar Sasuke after you graduate. It'd be great to see him get flattened by a newbie genin!"

"Have *you* ever beaten him, Naruto?" Asuka asked in an arch tone. I was a little confused by her manner. She'd been damn near incoherent a few hours ago, and now she acted like nothing was wrong? That must have been some bath.

"Well…" Naruto replied. "Technically, yes." He then proceeded to tell us about what happened between the two of them the day they'd been assigned to Team Seven. Asuka was outraged that he'd masqueraded as Sasuke to talk to Sakura, and I suppose that *was* a bit creepy, but the image of Sasuke trussed up like livestock kept making me laugh out loud.

All right, maybe I had picked up more than a little of Naruto's attitude regarding the Uchiha. But the stuck up way he'd acted around us – not to mention refusing an invitation to ramen – wasn't winning him

any points in my book. I was more than happy to laugh a bit at the twerp's expense.

Class was somewhat back to normal the next day. I was more than a little tired from lack of sleep, but I also felt… I don't know… lighter, maybe… than I had in a while.

I decided as we walked to the Academy to make Naruto another batch of tags that evening, with only slightly less chakra than the first ones.

Iruka-sensei was a little startled to see my hand un-bandaged and fully recovered from the chakra burns. The old man had hinted that my healing rate was unusual, even for a ninja, and my new teacher's reaction only underlined this. For the sake of our 'cover', I said out loud that the burns weren't as bad as they'd looked.

Iruka just nodded, evidently relieved at my subtlety. Of course, it's not like I wanted to wave a banner and announce, "Freaks here! Everyone hate us now!"

After that initial awkwardness, things settled down into a semblance of normality. Asuka and I struggled to pack away as much information about Konoha as we could. I think Iruka was a little unnerved that we actually paid attention during his history lectures. Naruto later confirmed that those were his favorite times to pull a prank.

I, on the other hand, found them highly interesting. We were *living* here now, and Asuka and I both wanted to fit in. Things that were common knowledge to our classmates were unknown territory for us.

Did you know that Konoha celebrates thirteen different festivals that aren't observed outside of Fire Country? Some of them make sense, like the Day of Remembrance in October (which is why Naruto never celebrated his own birthday before we arrived), but seriously, the Water Lily Festival? Those don't even grow around here that much.

Anyway, any kid will tell you that a desire to fit in is one of their most fervent desires, even when it wars with a desire for attention or recognition. That's one thing that made Naruto's situation so bad. And that's why Asuka and I were so interested in assimilating ourselves into Konohagakure's culture. Even if they are a bunch of weirdoes at times, they were our weirdoes now.

Working on our Taijutsu with Jaboru and the other larger boys also helped us improve. One of his buddies, a hulking kid with what I later learned were Inuzuka facial tattoos, was nearly as strong as the Akimichi, but moved a lot faster. He consistently pounded the snot out of me unless I used chakra, but I closed the gap between us a little more each day.

Asuka had grown a little fierce after the accident, and she seemed to relish fighting boys that outweighed her by a factor of three. The few times the other kunoichi talked 'The Iwa Princess' into working with them, she pretty much mopped the floor with them. Some of them resented it, but a couple actually got serious about their taijutsu and began to challenge the boys as well.

Given some of Naruto's off-hand remarks about his Academy days, this seemed somewhat unusual. Maybe not having a 'heart-throb' like Sasuke in our class encouraged more thinking and less hormones. Or maybe they found Asuka a little intimidating.

My friend had been raised in the Tsuchikage's household, but I didn't always grasp the implications of that upbringing. She had a way of looking at annoying people that I think she picked up from her fake mother. It was a combination of "you aren't nearly as amusing as you think you are" and "your life expectancy is dropping rapidly". I know for a fact that I was her best friend in Konoha – hell, her best friend, period – and it *still* made me twitch when she turned that glare on me.

The old man definitely hadn't prepared me for that.

Between her manner and the wildly exaggerated stories that were circulating – courtesy of my big mouth – Asuka was pretty much the queen of our class by the time of our graduation exam.

Naruto, in his less than subtle way, tried to prepare us for what would be on the examination. He rationalized this by saying that many of our classmates came from Shinobi families, and of course their older siblings, cousins, etc. would give them clues about what to expect.

It wasn't like the previews would help that much anyway, since the instructors changed the exact format a little each term. For example, we might be tested on any of the ninjutsu techniques we'd covered in class, and the exact rules for the Taijutsu matches could vary as well. Sometimes it was a straight tournament, other times competitors fought in a narrow circle until one was forced out. On one occasion, the genin candidates merely had to last thirty seconds against a bad-tempered chuunin without being knocked out. Naruto swore up and down he'd passed that last one, but the examiner with the stopwatch lied to make him fail.

Of course, now that I think about it, it doesn't seem quite as far-fetched as it had sounded at the time.

So it was with some trepidation that Asuka and I approached the Konoha Ninja Academy on the day of our examination.

Iruka seemed especially friendly that morning, and my opinion of him rose again. He knew that a good number of his students wouldn't make it. Some would stay in the academy to try again next term. Others would opt out of the Academy and transfer to the civilian school or apprentice themselves to a tradesman. Only those who'd truly mastered the basics would have a shot at joining a genin team.

But no matter the outcome, Umino Iruka didn't want his students' last memories of the Academy to be any more unpleasant than they had to be. It was this insight that made me grasp why a seemingly

undistinguished chuunin was given a position of such responsibility. He was a natural.

The Taijutsu examination was first. We were paired off by random lots to fight for two minutes or until one participant was clearly defeated. If the battle was inconclusive, grades would be assigned by the observers. I winced visibly when Asuka was called along with Senjiro. I more than half-suspected that she resented him for the burns I'd received as a result of his clumsiness.

This suspicion was borne out when Asuka proceeded to beat the crap out of a skinny boy that was nonetheless head and shoulders taller than she was. When Iruka's hands chopped downward to start the match, she was already a blur of motion. Senjiro, caught completely off guard, doubled over when the ball of her foot said hello to the pit of his stomach. Things went downhill from there, and it was just a matter of time before a spinning elbow strike impacted the hinge of his jaw and knocked him flat. Iruka called a halt just as Asuka was executing a leaping attack that would have landed her, knee-first, on the hapless boy's ribs.

It all happened so fast that I'm not one hundred percent sure of what happened next. Asuka was nearing the top of her leap when Iruka signaled the end of the match. She *should* have continued downward and either cracked his ribs or awkwardly straddled him *if* she could move her legs in time. That's why I rarely go aerial when I fight. I don't need the altitude to reach someone's face like she does, and it limits my ability to react if something changes while I'm in midair.

Instead of either of these things happening, Asuka seemed to glide backward a little in the air and landed gracefully in a crouch at the supine boy's feet. Iruka blinked twice, but then declared Asuka the victor.

Like it wasn't pretty obvious.

She was breathing hard and her cheeks were a little flushed when she walked back to the assembled students and stood next to me.

"Impressive hang time," I murmured.

She shot me a quick look, but didn't say anything as Iruka was already announcing the next match.

Of course, it had been a while since the gods had demonstrated their sadistic side where I was concerned. So it was only natural that I was called up along with Jaboru – someone else who desperately needed to do well in the Taijutsu exam.

The larger boy eyed me as we stepped into the sparring area. I nodded warily. "We need to make this look good," I mouthed to him.

His eyes narrowed. "All out?" he whispered back, making Iruka frown.

"Ready?" Iruka asked as I nodded. I felt a surge of chakra from Jaboru as our sensei signaled for us to start.

Jaboru mainly used chakra to enhance his speed. Otherwise, his bulk made his Taijutsu clumsy. I had a fair bit of speed already, so I used it more for striking power and blocking. The latter was highly advisable when your opponent's arms were roughly the size of tree trunks.

He flashed forward, aiming a pile-driver punch at my face. I leapt upward, violating my own rule since I needed to make a point to my instructors. The palm of my hand briefly rested on Jaboru's forearm as I vaulted over his attack, landing in the square behind him. I spun and made a lightning quick knife-hand strike at his kidneys. He put his elbow into my wrist hard enough to make my hand temporarily numb and followed up with a ridge hand strike to my neck. I ducked under that and neatly swept his legs out from under him.

But rather than crash to the ground with enough force to rattle everyone's teeth, he actually caught himself on the palm of his other hand. There ought to be a law against people large enough to qualify as a postal district being that agile. A foot larger than my head brushed past my hair as I barely dodged his counter. I swear I think that big turkey was holding back a little in our previous sparring sessions.

I guess he was also a little more devious than I gave him credit for. Good show.

But for all his mass, I was pretty sure I outweighed him on the chakra side of the equation. Hachimata aside, all that training with the old man occurred under the chakra suppression field of our shared cell. I think one factor in my initial recapture was the incredible distraction of my own chakra circulating freely for the first time in my life. I'd had no idea that it was supposed to be that easy.

So as the clock ticked down on our little exhibition, I began stepping up my own chakra usage. Jaboru's eyes narrowed as he realized that I might not have shown all my cards in our previous sparring either.

Let me make something clear. Passing this examination was crucial for two very important reasons. Making enough money to live on, without depending on the charity of others, was pretty important to both of us. I don't think Iruka, or the Hokage for that matter, would let us starve. But making enough money to have a choice in what we ate, or what we wore, meant more to us than I think anyone who hasn't been in our situation can appreciate. But even beyond that, I promised Asuka that I wasn't going anywhere, and damned if she wasn't going to hold me to that. The Hokage said he'd see what he could do to help us, but his hands would be tied if one of us passed the genin exam and the other failed.

After her performance against Senjiro, I suspected that unless I did as well, Asuka might very well throw the rest of her tests to ensure that we weren't separated.

Damned if I was going to be what held her back, and kept her eating plain rice another six months. Damned to hell if I would.

Jaboru's eyes widened when, instead of ducking a roundhouse blow that would have felled a tree, I blocked it instead. And with chakra gluing my feet to the ground, it was him that stumbled backward from the impact.

And then I went on the offensive. Jaboru, with the 'subtle' warning I'd just given him with that block, used his enhanced speed to dodge my axe kick. He'd blurred aside in a move that earned a few gasps from the dumber students as my heel put a six inch deep divot in the ground where he'd been standing.

He put a roundhouse kick into my side that I had to lean into in order to block it. As it was, my feet left furrows in the ground as I was shifted several inches to the left by the impact. Without chakra, I'm pretty sure my arm would have been broken as well.

I stumbled forward as I ducked under a punch. I'd tried to glue my feet to the ground with chakra to block the kick, but that only meant that the loose soil under my feet was shifted aside as well, leaving me with uneven footing. Damn, but that Akimichi hit hard. Making the best of my stumble, I dove between Jaboru's wide-set feet and did a duck and roll, rising up behind him with my fist cocked back just as Iruka called a halt to the match. Jaboru, who was spinning around in a panic, relaxed and let out his breath with a whoosh.

I extended my hand. "Good fight," I said evenly.

He slapped at my hand instead of shaking it. I was confused for a second as his hand drew back, but from his smile I guessed it was supposed to be a friendly gesture. "You are one tough bastard, Snake-Eyes," he said with a grunt.

I scowled at him. "You aren't so bad yourself, Mountain-That-Walks," I replied sarcastically.

Iruka shook his head as Jaboru laughed out loud and strutted back toward the other students. Our sensei was smiling a little, but the other examiners still looked a bit shocked. They had to suspend the matches for a few minutes and use a Doton jutsu to level the ground in the sparring area again. I had a pretty good feeling about my grade as I rejoined Asuka in the ranks.

The rest of the examinations went about how I expected. The written ones were tough, but we made do. It wasn't like we had the money or the friends to do much besides study in the evenings, and Naruto rarely finished with his team before it was fully dark. I still finished my tests a little before Asuka, but that was mostly owing to my penmanship. I'd tried to teach her a little about seals when she asked, wondering if her… tenant… would have any unusual effects on any tags she produced. Unfortunately, she just couldn't seem to get comfortable using a formal calligraphy brush.

I considered just letting her charge up some tags I'd drawn, but the old man had cautioned me against trying anything like that. Tags tended to be a lot more stable, and safer to store, if you *didn't* mix foreign chakras during creation.

Given how powerful my explosive tags had turned out, safety considerations were paramount.

Okay, maybe that was an odd word to end a sentence with. I'd discovered another vice that had been virtually unknown in my prior existence: books.

Of course I knew what books were – the old man wasn't that daft. We just never had any. At all. I'd never had the opportunity to read something that wasn't just written in blood by myself or the old man. That's fine for learning your letters, but is a bit unwieldy for general education. Thus, most of my formal learning had been conducted orally. When I'd asked Iruka about the books stored in the low shelves in the corner of the room behind his desk, he handed me a

primer on Konoha history and told me to bring it back when I was done.

He was a little surprised when I returned it the next day. I'd already read all my textbooks. Twice. So it wasn't like I had anything else to focus on the previous evening.

Naruto did bring some books over when he moved in, but most of those were old text books or training manuals, most of which were out of date. There were a few tattered old comic books as well. While my roommate treasured them, I found them a little thin on the plot side.

Anyway, this led to me devouring all four of Iruka's shelves before the end of the term – to Iruka-sensei's vast amusement, it seemed. It also led to me occasionally using larger words than usual, to Naruto's visible dismay. Asuka thought it was kind of funny though – and I don't know whether to be pleased or annoyed about that.

But in the end, some of the things I'd read helped me complete my Konoha History, Shinobi Law, and Chakra Theory examinations a little faster, so it wasn't exactly wasted time. If I passed, my next leisure-time project would be to tackle the Konoha Public Library. Naruto assured me that they had an entire wing devoted to scrolls on Ninjutsu, Genjutsu, and sealing techniques, but admission was restricted to only those wearing a leaf forehead protector.

Asuka looked a little less confident than I felt, but it wasn't like she didn't know the material. I was confident she'd passed those tests as well.

It was the rest of the day that sucked.

The weapon tests went about as badly as I'd expected. The kunai-throwing was downright embarrassing. Asuka did all right, but out of ten throws, six were required to hit the target in order to achieve the lowest passing grade. By some miracle (not to mention hours of

boring practice with Uzumaki-san on the weekends) I managed to get six hits in nine throws.

Iruka's audible sigh of relief when I made that last hit was *entirely* uncalled for.

Eight hits was the threshold for the mediocre rank, so my tenth throw was purely a formality. It was sheer pique that lead me to palm one of my smallest tags and attach it to the handle of my kunai without Iruka noticing. The ball of fire that incinerated the target, not to mention making Sensei jump with a muttered oath, more than adequately expressed my feelings on the whole subject of kunai-chucking.

Still, that was the test I'd been dreading the most, and I managed to squeak by. Asuka had nine hits to show for her ten throws, so there were no worries there either.

The final test was almost anti-climactic. Kawarimi no Jutsu, the emergency substitution technique was selected for the Ninjutsu exam and both of us performed it flawlessly. As I walked back to my seat, Asuka showed me how to do a proper "high five".

At the end of the day, we'd both been presented with forehead protectors etched with the symbol of Konohagakure. It was, without a doubt, the best day of my life so far.

We were both a little surprised to see Naruto loitering around the entrance to the Academy. He explained rather sheepishly that Team 7 had finished that day's mission a little early, and he'd begged off from training so he could find out how we'd done. Reading between the lines, I guessed that his jonin-sensei wasn't up to training a thoroughly distracted Naruto, but I was touched nonetheless.

What I wasn't expecting were the reactions of our classmates. Several of them stared at our roommate with expressions ranging between wariness and outright distaste.

But the anxious parents who'd come to pick them up acted far worse.

It didn't take a lot of skill to read their lips or hear the muttered curses. A few glared at him with such venomous hatred that I was really surprised they didn't draw weapons.

Naruto seemed oblivious to this at first, but I did notice the skin tighten around his eyes. It was a little disconcerting how well he hid his emotions when he actually bothered.

I quickly looked around, but Iruka-sensei was still inside, no doubt collating the examination results for the Hokage's office. I gritted my teeth. Time to put my ryou where my seal was.

"Oi! Naruto-san! You didn't have to take off from work just to check on us!" I said in a loud voice. Some of the glares changed to looks of shock as their eyes shifted toward me. Normally, I'm not too comfortable being the object of public scrutiny. I didn't have any say in the events that changed my eyes along with my hair and complexion, so it naturally irks me a little when people stare. But anything was better than watching all these idiots hating Naruto for being the instrument of their salvation.

Naruto's eyes widened at my… unexpected… jocularity. When he hesitated, I quickly stepped forward, suppressing my discomfort, and gave him a quick, masculine hug, punctuated by a firm slap on the back. I locked eyes with him as I stepped back, hoping to get the point across.

Asuka looked far more natural as she stepped forward and hugged him tightly, cooing something about "Naruto-ni-san" before she stepped back.

Naruto was blushing a little now, but his eyes were grateful as he babbled happily, pointing at our new forehead protectors. Unlike some of our classmates, we both wore ours around our foreheads. In my case, it helped keep my hair under control. Regular washing

didn't exactly make it want to curl, but it seemed more and more to have a mind of its own.

With her shorter hair, Asuka didn't need to hold anything back. On the other hand, it did add some weight to counterbalance her features, helping her to not look so young. From some of her comments, she hadn't enjoyed being the youngest in her ersatz family, and didn't enjoy being dismissed as a mere child in her new home. I always talked to her like the adult she now legally was, given that she had graduated, because it hadn't really occurred to me to do anything different. In time, I'd come to realize how much that pleased her.

Our overly friendly greetings to our room-mate definitely had their desired effect. We'd managed to confuse the hell out of everyone around us – to my vast amusement.

"Hey Snake-Eyes!" Jaboru called out. I winced at my new "nickname" as Naruto's grin grew even wider.

"What is it, Mountain-That-Walks?" I asked as I turned around. Behind Jaboru was a man I assumed was his father. There was no doubt in my mind that he was an Akimichi, given his size. I also noticed that he wasn't scowling like most of the adults. His expression was carefully neutral, if anything.

"You know this joker?" he asked, cocking his head in Naruto's direction.

"He's just our roommate," I replied calmly. In for a senbon, in for a kunai.

Jaboru snorted, but it wasn't a completely unfriendly sound. "I'll be damned," he said after a moment. "Make sure you get him to tell you about the time he 'decorated' the Hokage monument." With that, he turned toward his father and they made their way through the crowd.

Amazing how it just parted before the pair of juggernauts.

Naruto's shock didn't eclipse the small grin of pride on his face. But if anything, the expressions of the adults grew even angrier and more outraged. At this point I decided it might be better to leave before we started a riot or something.

I just shook my head at Uzumaki Naruto. Then I said the magic words. "You can tell us at Ichiraku's."

For once, I didn't mind dropping a wad of cash into Ichiraku Teuchi's retirement fund. As genin, we'd be making our own money soon, so I didn't mind dipping into the envelope Iruka had given us for the tags.

Of course I was a little less sanguine about our expenditures when Naruto mention the individual tests that some instructor-jonin liked to spring on their genin teams. The possibility that Asuka and I could still be shuffled back to the Academy hadn't even occurred to me.

Naruto quickly reassured me that the tests usually weren't all that bad. Only his instructor had a reputation for regularly failing teams with something called a "bell test". I don't know if it was my facial expression that first alarmed my roommate, or the fact that the chopsticks I'd been holding were now a mass of splinters.

Ayame passed me a fresh pair with a sympathetic expression – right before she rapped her knuckles on Naruto's forehead. His complaints earned him a further scolding, but I could tell her heart wasn't really in it.

"We'll be okay," Asuka said quietly as Naruto and the waitress squabbled. "I heard one of the older examiners say after you and Jaboru fought that he hadn't seen a genin Taijutsu match that good since Kakashi fought someone named Gai."

I shrugged. "You schooled Senjiro pretty well too. I didn't even see him at the later tests. But what if our new teacher wants to see how well we throw kunai?" I asked worriedly.

Asuka actually smiled at that. "Then you tag your kunai like you did today and blow them up."

"Maybe," I grunted sourly, "but I still don't like this."

That just seemed to set her off, and her incessant giggling made it a challenge to maintain a proper scowl. Finally, Naruto's bottomless stomach was temporarily filled and we bade good night to Teuchi and Ayame.

Once we were home and sorting through our paperwork from the Academy, another problem presented itself.

Since we didn't have adult guardians, it fell to Asuka and me to fill out our official paperwork and applications for Konoha Shinobi Licenses. Naruto wasn't much help, as the Hokage had filled out most of his paperwork for him. Though our roommate did mutter something about his official photograph, he refused to elaborate.

In my case in particular, I had to leave an uncomfortably large number of questions unanswered. I didn't actually know my biological parents, though some of the old man's comments allowed me to supply my mother's profession. But writing down 'prostitute' didn't make me feel any better.

For that matter, I didn't really have a family name either. Asuka *did* have one, but she didn't really want to use it, so we were in the same boat. We both looked up at each other when the answer to our mutual dilemma presented itself.

Naruto, attempting to make some cup ramen, let out a rather vile epithet when he burned his hand on the kettle.

Asuka and I looked back at each other and nodded. I jumped up and carefully righted the kettle before the kitchen floor was covered with boiling water, while Asuka dragged the genin over to the sink to run cold water over his tender hand.

"Naruto-ni-san?" she asked in a sweet voice as he let out a sigh of relief. For an instant I felt a pang of what I supposed was jealousy. She never talked to me like that.

"Yeah?" he asked warily. He'd evidently picked up on the fact that little Asuka clearly wanted something.

"Would you mind if we adopted your last name for our official records?" she asked sweetly.

I was a little surprised he didn't immediately agree with her. "Why would you want to do that?" he asked, confused.

"Well," she said, taken a little aback, "we have to put something. Hikaru doesn't have a family and I don't want anything to do with mine."

Naruto frowned. "Wouldn't that make us… like a family or something?" he asked slowly.

"Cousins, at least, from a legal standpoint," I said thoughtfully, trying to recall one of Iruka's lectures. "More like a clan since we aren't all brothers and sisters."

"Uzumaki Clan," Naruto said slowly, as if he was tasting it. He slowly smiled. "I like the sound of that," he added.

That grin of his was damned insidious. "Since you are, technically, the oldest, that would make you the head of the clan, wouldn't it?" I asked innocently. If he wanted to be Hokage someday, maybe a little leadership practice would be a good thing.

I swear to Kami I saw his eyes *ignite* in a sudden burst of enthusiasm. "That is soooo cool!" he shouted. "We'll be the Uzumaki Clan! And we can all wear-"

"No Orange!" Asuka barked, jolting Naruto out of his twisted power fantasy.

"What's wrong with orange?" Naruto asked petulantly, sticking out his lower lip. I began wondering if this was a good idea.

"Nothing if you want to get killed on a mission," I said snarkily. "Now, dark colors like black and green," I explained, gesturing downward at my outfit,"are much more practical."

"I like red," Asuka interjected in a firm voice.

I shot her a look, but she had a point. "Maybe we shouldn't try to have official colors," I said quickly. I peered at the back of Naruto's jacket. "What about a common symbol?" I suggested, pointing to the red spiral adorning the orange canvas. "Uzumaki is derived from a word for spiral or whirlpool, so it seems appropriate," I added.

"I like the color," Asuka added brightly.

I rolled my eyes until her foot rapped my shin.

"Okay then," I said quickly. "We'll use the Uzumaki name on our official paperwork. That should get the ball rolling." I scratched my head. "Do we need to do anything else to make it official?" I asked Asuka. I couldn't remember for sure, but she'd attended the same lectures.

She shook her head. "I don't think so, not yet anyway. Most of Konoha's shinobi clans weren't really recognized as such until they'd been around for a while. I don't think we'll be campaigning for a spot on the village council any time soon, will we?"

I shuddered, imagining the outcry *that* would spark. "No, not for a while yet," I agreed quickly.

You'll understand if I was still a little nervous when we reported to the Academy for team assignments the next day. The specter of failure still haunted my sleep and I had no idea what to expect.

Naruto's stories about *his* sensei utterly failed to reassure me.

Still, it wasn't like we really had a choice. So nine a.m. found us reporting to the assigned room with the other graduates. I nodded to Akimichi Jaboru and his Inuzuka buddy, Kaizo, as Asuka and I took a pair of seats near the front. It actually wouldn't be too bad working with the big guy, but I doubted they'd assign two taijutsu specialists to the same team.

On the other hand, this *was* Konoha, so common sense was, at best, optional.

Something was bothering me after I sat down and Iruka strolled in and congratulated everyone. It wasn't until he'd started calling out names as the jonin arrived that it dawned on me.

There were fourteen new genin in the classroom.

As far as I knew, genin were assigned in teams of three, so something was definitely going on here. This suspicion was borne out as the last jonin left and Asuka and I were left alone with Iruka in the classroom.

I raised my eyebrow at our former instructor. He made a face.

"We had an odd number of students graduate this time," he explained. "Normally, we'd adjust the minimum threshold for passing to ensure that we graduated a multiple of three, but there weren't really any students left that were close to passing. Conversely, it wouldn't have been fair to fail the two lowest-ranking students, since even they were well above the minimum. Given you two and your… situation… the Hokage decided that it might be best to do something a little different with regards to your team assignment."

"Different?" I asked warily.

Iruka nodded. "Given the circumstances, it would be better if you two stayed close to Konoha for the most part. The Hokage said there

was a chance that you two might become targets for foreign shinobi, and there weren't any jonin-sensei's strong enough to ensure your safety if you traveled far from Konoha."

It irked me a little that being jinchuuriki would bar us from being on a regular genin team, but I could see his point. It also made me reevaluate the grey-haired weirdo that Naruto worked for. I nodded.

Iruka winced as a loud thump echoed from the outside wall. "You two have been assigned as assistants to a special jonin working on an important project." He paused. "Don't consider this to be a negative reflection on your skills or the work you've done here," he added in a stern voice. Then he smiled. "Given your circumstances, I am quite pleased by the progress you have made. I promised you once that if you studied hard, you would succeed, and you have proven me correct!"

It was a little hard to be cynical in the face of such blinding sincerity. So I just smiled instead. He was kind of a dork at times, but Iruka's heart was definitely in the right place, and I appreciated him wanting to reassure us.

That was when the door opened and my warm and fuzzy feelings came to an abrupt halt.

"I definitely need to work on my aim," a woman with spiky purple hair muttered, rubbing her head. She appeared to be wearing a trench coat over shin-guards, a leather mini-skirt, and a tight mail shirt that left absolutely nothing to the imagination. "Oi! Iruka! Are these my new…"

Her voice cut off as she looked toward us. The next thing I knew a pair of *very* sharp kunai were speeding toward me. I leapt out of my seat, fueled by panic and all the chakra I could mold on an instant's notice. As it was, one of the blades still nicked my calf, drawing a tiny amount of blood. Diving into a roll, I came to my feet just in time to duck a punch that cracked the plaster of the wall behind my head.

My desperate counter-punch was mostly absorbed by her metallic body armor, eliciting little more than a grunt. She'd just grabbed me by the throat, short nails digging into the flesh, when there was a loud whoosh and a gout of flames set the back of her trench coat on fire.

The crazy woman spun, flinging another pair of kunai at Asuka and I promptly

went berserk.

A fist, wreathed in a glow of sickly green chakra, crashed into her jaw, sending her stumbling backward. I realized after a moment that the fist was mine. Her fingertips were red with blood where they'd been ripped loose from my throat, but I was feeling no pain. She cocked her arm at me and a freaking *snake* flew out of her sleeve at me, fangs extended. Gluing my feet to the floor with chakra, I ripped a desk loose from the floor and swatted the reptile out of the air.

You might think my tenant would have objected to that, but I figured he was called the eight-tailed *dragon* for a reason. Confusing him with snakes was probably as insulting as calling a human an ape.

The snake disappeared in a puff of smoke, making me wonder if it had even been real. Of course, that was enough distraction for the crazy woman to follow up with a kick to the stomach that sent me flying across the room.

Remember that part where I'd glued my feet to the floor with chakra? Well, two rather large hunks of flooring accompanied me on my journey, still stuck to my sandals. That woman hit *hard* .

My shoulders and back hit Iruka's desk hard enough to send it careening into the wall. I was vaguely aware of him shouting something, but I needed to keep all my attention focused on this Iwakagure infiltrator. More than anything, I was annoyed that he wasn't helping, at least a little. Or going for help. Or something!

I was starting to wonder about that when Asuka chucked a ball of fire at the assassin. I noticed a line of blood from a long scratch on my friend's cheek and my mind went up in flames. My muscles began to burn from all the chakra flowing into them as I leapt up from the floor and slammed my shoulder into the assassin's midsection. I heard a muffled 'oof' from her right before we punched through the wall of the classroom and into the hallway.

However, blasting through a cinder-block wall takes no small amount of effort. Even though my legs were still pumping, without a running start I couldn't smash her through the opposite side of the hallway. I kept her pinned there for an instant before something thick and scaly wrapped around my neck, squeezing tight and cutting off my air.

I stumbled backward with an enormous python wrapped around my neck and shoulders. It reared back to hiss at me, grinding scales into my flesh and doing its damnedest to pop my head off like a stubborn cork.

Drunk on chakra, I still have no idea what possessed me to *bite* the damned thing. I was probably more shocked than it was when some abruptly enlarged canines punched through the scales like rice paper. Again, the snake disappeared with a loud pop and a puff of smoke. Was it some kind of jutsu?

I had no time to ponder that question because a monstrously powerful kick sent me flying back through the hole we'd made in the wall. I hit the floor and tumbled, bits of debris bruising the already-abused flesh of my back.

The assassin was just coming back through the hole in the wall when an intense wall of fire blocked her path. She stepped back, seeming to consider running through it or going for the door when Iruka jumped in between us.

My ears were still ringing, but it looked like he was yelling for us to stop. Lip-reading attempts aside, the purple of his complexion set off

the scar on his nose nicely, and hinted that something was wrong here.

It took a little while for order to be restored. Fortunately, Asuka proved to be just as good at putting out fires as starting them, and she was able to snuff out her improvised barrier before it set off the overhead sprinklers.

But my appreciation of Asuka's talents was abruptly forgotten when Iruka announced that this Mitarashi Anko was going to be our jonin instructor.

"We're supposed to work with this crazy woman?" I demanded at the top of my lungs. "Iruka, she just freaking tried to kill me!"

"Hey, I thought you were someone else," she said dismissively, like that explained everything.

I grabbed the top of my head and roughly gathered a hank of hair in my fist. "Just for the record, psycho, this is GREEN hair. Any other resemblance to that whack job is just a coincidence. Do you normally go around killing people because of how they look or do you get especially murderous around schools?"

That earned me a scowl. "I don't see why you're so upset; it's not like anyone was seriously hurt."

"Not for a lack of effort on your part!" I shot back. "And look at Asuka's face! Two inches to the left and she'd be on her way to the morgue right now and you'd be next," I snarled.

"I. Don't. Miss." Anko said, stalking toward me again and biting off every word. "Ever." She poked a finger into my chest. "And don't you ever threaten anyone unless you plan to follow through on it, boy."

"Stop it! Both of you!" Iruka shouted, making both of us jump. "Anko, one more word and the Hokage will get a *detailed* report of

everything that happened here today. Hikaru, I'm ashamed of you. She may have jumped to conclusions, but Anko *is* your new sensei. You *will* show her respect if you want to be a shinobi of the Leaf."

I couldn't ever recall being this angry – not even when I made my first kill in Iwakagure. I stood there, trembling on the verge of complete insubordination, when Asuka put her hand on my shoulder. "Hikaru?" she said in a quiet voice.

I gave Iruka a quick nod, then turned back to this Anko person. "Yes, you are our new sensei and as such I will show you the proper respect," I said aloud. Then I dropped my voice to a whisper. "And if you ever hurt Asuka, they will never find your body."

I'd meant every word, but I wasn't prepared for what happened next. Anko's eyes narrowed as she glared at me and then glanced at Asuka. Finally, as Kami is my witness, the crazy woman smirked at me!

What the hell had we gotten into here?

Author's Notes:

Thanks to Runsamok and Bibliophile for excellent and speedy beta-work.

Gai and Kakashi are roughly the same age, so they probably did attend the Academy together. It isn't specified when Gai graduated, but even if it was after Kakashi, they could have fought each other in the taijutsu examination and Gai could have blown one of the other tests and had to repeat. (Which might explain some of his support for Rock Lee's ambitions.)

People who object to my use of the word "odd" need to look at all the definitions of the word. Fourteen can still be an odd number if you are dividing something up into threes. (I'm amazed at the number of 'corrections' I receive where the person didn't even check dictionary dot com.)

If you have questions about my update schedule or future plans, please check the blog (link is in my profile) – I recently posted about some changes, starting this month with NaNoWriMo.

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

To say that we'd gotten off on the wrong foot with our new sensei was a massive understatement. More like the entire leg, and let us not mention where it was stuffed, either. And it wasn't like she didn't have issues of her own.

"All right, you brats," she began, reminding me that she'd more than gotten off on the wrong foot with *me* as well. "I don't really have time for babysitting a couple of snot-nosed newbies, but the Hokage needs you two occupied with something close to home. I've been saddled with running the second part of the Chuunin Examination, so I got stuck with you." She paused, looking us up and down. "I was hoping to at least get some free labor out of the deal, but from the looks of things I'm just screwed."

I ground my teeth, but stayed silent. Asuka snorted a little.

"You think your pathetic uselessness is funny?" Anko snarled.

"If we were that useless, I don't think you'd have lost your coat or been knocked through a wall, sensei," Asuka said in a small voice.

Anko opened her mouth as Asuka spoke, but at the very end she clamped it shut. I felt my blood chill as our new teacher seemed to radiate malice. "Don't ever call me that again," she ground out.

"What?" I asked. "Sensei?"

Quick as a flash her hand snapped out and wrapped around my throat again.

Like I said… Issues.

The second set of bruises on my neck was healed by the time we made it to the training grounds. Anko didn't talk the whole way. Asuka was quiet. My frigging throat hurt.

"Okay," the psycho finally said. "This is where I ask you about your likes and dislikes, your hopes and dreams, and pretend to be interested. Then I make up a lot of lies about myself to make me sound cool so you'll pay attention to what I say." She paused. "Let's just skip that bullshit. If you don't pay attention to what I say, I'll make your lives a living hell. Any questions?"

"So," I said slowly. "We've established that you are a major bitch. You don't want to have to deal with genin students, and the only reason you were assigned to us is because the Hokage required it. You resent that, and thus you are determined to take it out on us. Is that it?"

"Yeah," she drawled. "But if you work your asses off, I might teach you a couple of things. Now I have an important meeting with several pieces of dango. Report back here tomorrow morning at 8 am sharp. If you make me come looking for you, I'll make you regret it."

With that, she formed some seals and disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

I glanced over at Asuka. "What do you want to bet she's off to buy a new trenchcoat?"

From my conversations with Naruto, *normal* genin teams were assigned D-Rank missions involving such riveting tasks as walking dogs, finding lost cats, and cleaning up messes. I suppose that might have been set up so new team-mates would get to know each other and figure out how to work together. In between missions, their sensei was supposed to train them and teach them what they needed to know.

When they weren't reading porn, that is.

Needless to say, Anko didn't do anything close to that. Instead of doing D-Rank missions, we were helping her fix up one of the largest training areas I'd ever seen. Yeah, I know Konohagakure is the "Village Hidden in the Leaves", so calling training ground forty-four the "Forest of Death" seems kind of redundant. I mean really, a forest within a forest?

The truly scary thing is that it didn't even occur to me at first. I was growing so used to Leaf Weirdness™ that it wasn't even impinging on my awareness anymore. Next thing I knew I'd probably start wearing wildly inappropriate clothing, reading porn in public, or screaming about the fires of youth like that nut-job I saw running laps around the village with a smaller doppelganger.

I just hoped Asuka did the right thing and immolated me on the spot if I degenerated that far. I mean, what are friends for, after all?

It's amazing what your thoughts will turn to if you get bored enough.

Learning how to re-wire a surveillance camera was actually kind of interesting. The first time. But doing it for eight hours straight is another matter entirely. It didn't help that the first day of it was an exercise in frustration.

Anko – we learned quickly to never, ever, call her Sensei – presented us with a pile of nonfunctional video cameras that had been retrieved from the Forest of Death, a couple of cartons of spare parts, and a toolkit. Our instructions were "make them work again" and then she wandered off to go terrorize some chuunin.

It took us about half an hour to figure out how to get the weather-tight cases open. Anko was not amused. When I asked her how the hell we were supposed to know how to repair electronic surveillance gear, she dug a couple of manuals out of another crate and promptly winged them at my head.

Okay, yes, I am a ninja, and if I'd actually been hurt by a softcover book I'd deserve it, but really, the principle of the thing! What the hell

was wrong with her?

I spent most of the rest of the day poring over the manuals while Asuka opened some more of the casings and cleaned out any obvious contaminants. After we were dismissed by our clearly unimpressed leader, I went directly to the library while Asuka cashed in our pay stubs.

I smirked at the librarian as I straightened my forehead protector and walked right past her. She'd made it quite clear before we graduated from the Academy that I wasn't welcome in her domain. But now, she could hardly bar me from entering. I checked out a couple of basic electronics texts. Hopefully after reading those I'd be able to understand the more specialized manual I'd brought home from the workshop.

Aside from annoying the old woman running the library, the high point of my day occurred after I returned home. Asuka had gone grocery shopping on her way back, and the larder was full to overflowing. It turns out that our current assignment paid by the hour – and we were drawing a bit more than genin working D-Rank missions would normally earn.

She'd even had time to visit Iruka-sensei's apartment and borrow a cookbook.

Fortunately, she'd decided to stick with our original division of labor and leave the cooking to me. I'm not sure exactly why she is a disaster in the kitchen, but I made a point of not getting too amused about that. Besides, doing the laundry and the shopping was more than her fair share of the work anyway.

I also appreciated her delicacy regarding the cookbook. While I was technically far more proficient in the kitchen, my repertoire of dishes was rather limited. She didn't make a big deal about it, she just automatically made adjustments for it. I appreciated that more than I could say, so I let her pick the entrée.

Naruto arrived while I was just finishing up. Asuka looked up from the manual she'd been trying to work her way through and gasped. Our roommate looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge. Backwards.

He just shook his head when she asked him what happened, then he sniffed the air and his eyes grew wide. "What is that?" he asked.

"Beef Bowl with green onions and miso soup," I answered.

"Er," Naruto said, looking down, "can I have some?" he asked.

I blinked. "I made it for all three of us."

Naruto got this amazed smile. I started to feel a little uncomfortable when I was reminded of how some people treated him. For him to even ask like that…

"You need more protein in your diet anyway," I continued. "It's embarrassing for the head of the Uzumaki clan to be such a shrimp."

"Hey!" Naruto shouted. "I can't help it if I haven't gotten my growth spurt yet. I drink a lot of milk!"

"Milk alone isn't enough," I countered with a grin. It almost made me feel guilty, he was so easy to set off.

Asuka made one of those exasperated sighs again. She didn't even have to say "Boys!" this time. "Naruto, if you want to contribute some of your mission pay to the food budget, it's fine. It isn't that much more work to cook for three instead of two."

"She's right," I added.

"Just make sure you keep the place picked up and clean," she added in a slightly scolding tone.

Naruto gave her a mocking bow and made a big production of creating a quartet of clones and assigning them to clean-up duty.

Asuka scowled a little. Maybe it was a little cheap of him to use a jutsu to help, but it wasn't like she had to do the laundry by beating it against a rock in the stream. No one thought washing machines were cheating, did they?

His clones finished up as I dished up the rice. "Hey Naruto," I asked as I measured out the portions. "Is that technique hard to do?"

Naruto shrugged. "It's easier for me than regular Bunshin no Jutsu," he replied. "But everyone says it's supposed to be really, really hard. Mainly because it takes so much chakra. I can do it because of, well, you know…"

As we ate, he told us the whole story about the night he learned how to do it. My respect for Iruka-sensei jumped up another notch. I just wish Anko was more like him. As we cleared the dishes, I broached the topic I'd been circling around since he arrived. "Would you mind showing me the seals?" I asked.

Naruto frowned. "For what?"

I resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."

"Oh." He said, his face blank. "Sure."

It was my turn to blink. Most shinobi were pretty careful with information regarding their techniques – the higher ranked the more careful. From what I'd gathered, this was Naruto's favorite technique, and I wasn't sure how he'd react to me wanting to learn it.

"Er," Naruto grumbled, "are you sure you want to learn it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think it would be kind of useful for some of the things Anko wants us to do. We're doing tons of maintenance work, and I think it's going to get ridiculously tedious after a while."

"I mean, are you sure it's, well, safe?" Naruto clarified. "Kakashi-sensei told us that it's a jonin-level technique, and if I didn't have really crazy chakra reserves it would have killed me the first time I tried to use it." He looked honestly worried.

I nodded slowly. He'd actually brought up a good point, and it deserved to be taken seriously. "I think my seal is like yours," I explained. "I appear to have really large chakra reserves as well. Old Man told me that making a set of explosive tags should leave me pretty tired, and I felt fine afterwards. I can also use chakra when I spar for a long time and not get tired. I don't think I've ever had chakra exhaustion."

"Speak for yourself," Asuka grumbled as she stacked the clean cups.

"Your seal was made by someone completely different," I added. "I think it was focused more on tapping into the elemental abilities of your Bijuu, rather than just it's chakra. I think that's why you are so incredibly good with fire techniques."

She nodded, apparently mollified. She'd been pretty annoyed when we trained together and she tired out before I did. She'd evidently displayed better endurance than any of her faux-siblings, and felt a little miffed to be the one that had to stop first.

"Anyway," I continued, turning back to Naruto. "You are right to be concerned. I'll start off slowly and only create one clone at a time so I can gauge how much it drains me. Fair enough?"

Naruto nodded enthusiastically, clearly relieved. Maybe he was taking this whole clan-leader thing a little more seriously than I thought.

I couldn't help but smile.

I couldn't help but groan as I fell into bed.

Learning Kage Bunshin no Jutsu was easy enough. After dinner, Naruto and I adjourned to the roof where he taught me the hand seals. Less than an hour later, I was staring at an exact duplicate of myself.

"That didn't take too much chakra at all," I said to Naruto. The clone nodded, which was a little disconcerting. It also helped that I didn't waste near as much chakra as Naruto did. He even said that his chakra control was much improved over what it had been in the Academy!

I played around with the technique a few times. Seeing how much chakra it took for one, two, five, and ten clones. Even the latter didn't really seem to put much of a dent in my reserves. After a while, my cautious experimentation must have bored my erstwhile sensei, because he suggested we adjourn to the nearest training ground to see how well my clones could fight.

I remembered grinning a little remembering how I'd torn through his clones when I'd been upset about making Asuka cry. I'd been anticipating a bit of a massacre.

I had no idea of how much that word would apply.

One-on-one, I knew my Taijitsu was a little better than Naruto's. Old Man had taught me what he could in the cell, and I'd polished it more than a little under Iruka's watchful eye at the Konoha Ninja Academy. Hell, even Akimichi Jaboru had helped – and not just a little. My clones had their own chakra systems – one reason why kage bunshin were so hideously chakra intensive – so they could do some of the same tricks I did to enhance speed and striking power.

However, one thing I didn't have a lot of practice at was fighting as part of a group.

Naruto's clones fought like some kind of freaky hive-mind gestalt.

Like a couple of kids I'd seen, playing with toy shinobi action figures, we'd gone to the training ground and created our own armies and set them against each other. The first exchange of blows wiped out three of my clones and seven of Naruto's.

The second took out eleven of mine as Naruto's clones took advantage of openings created by the deaths of their comrades.

My clones fought like, well, clones of me. They could man-handle any Naruto clone they fought one-on-one, but could be overwhelmed when tackled by three at once.

What was freaky was how his clones would all decide to attack specific ones of mine all at once. No whispered conversations, no orders, just jump in and kick their asses.

Naruto still had thirty clones left of his original batch when I had to start replacing mine. I concentrated on how they were fighting, trying to figure out what I was doing wrong. That concentration ended up paying an unusual dividend.

The embarrassment at how my clones were faring wasn't the worst part either. As the war of attrition wore on, I started to become aware of phantom pains in my body. As I watched the battle, I realized I was feeling echoes of the last blows my clones took as they were dispersed. I closed my eyes when a rather brutal kick was unsuccessfully blocked – resulting in one of my clones turning bright red as a Naruto-clone's sandal ground into it's crotch. I felt a burst of nausea and realized that I could recall everything that clone had experienced, including its last instant of gut-wrenching pain.

I called for a halt as I struggled to keep my dinner down. Naruto immediately called off his clones and asked if I was feeling light headed. It wasn't chakra exhaustion I was feeling though.

"Did that scroll say anything about side effects of using Kage Bunshin?" I asked him.

Naruto frowned, scratched his head and shrugged. "I didn't get a lot of time to read the scroll," he said. "I thought I only had an hour to master one of the techniques, so I picked the first one. They never let me see the scroll again after we returned it."

I sighed and created another clone, whispering some orders into its ear. It tapped one of Naruto's clones and motioned toward the trees at the edge of the clearing. The two clones walked out of sight.

Naruto turned toward me. "What?" Then he twitched. "Why the hell did he do that?" he demanded, absent-mindedly rubbing his neck.

"What happened?" I asked calmly.

"You know damn well," Naruto snapped. "As soon as they were out of sight, your clone stabbed mine in the neck!"

"How do you know that?" I asked.

Naruto's mouth dropped open. "Uh…"

"I sort of noticed that when your clone kicked mine in the balls and *I* got the memory of what that felt like," I said. Naruto swallowed and looked a little sheepish. "No," I continued, "I know it was an accident. The point is that I shouldn't have known what that felt like – but I think we get memories from the clones when they are dispersed. That's how you knew my clone attacked yours when they were out of sight." I looked at him again. He looked utterly shocked. "You never noticed that before?" I asked incredulously.

Naruto shrugged uncomfortably. "I've always had them with me, fighting," he said defensively. "I usually don't let them out of my sight because I don't want them running around unsupervised."

"I see," I replied. Actually, I didn't, but I also didn't want to make him even more uncomfortable. "How do you get them to coordinate so well?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The way they would gang up on my clones without even communicating," I explained. "Do you plan out battle tactics for situations like this ahead of time? Is there a set pattern you use? I couldn't detect one, but it's probably more sophisticated than I could figure out on the fly…"

"Ah, no…" Naruto murmured. "It's, ah… well, when I had to train by myself, I always imagined what it would be like to fight on a team, and, well…"

I abruptly felt like kicking myself again. Of course no one would train after school with the village's demonic pariah. Or even 'play ninja' with him when he was younger. I didn't even have to wonder why he tolerated Konohamaru's antics. He'd had only himself to play with, so his clones all fought like they had imaginary playmates – only theirs were real. If he'd been doing that for this long, no wonder he was kicking my ass.

It was both admirable and pathetic at the same time. As we made our way home well after dark, I realized that he'd make a perfect Hokage for this village full of weirdoes.

Before I went to bed, I decided to do a little experiment. I created a couple of clones and had them each sit on the couch and read as much of the library books as possible overnight. A third one was tasked with finishing the camera repair manual and making bento lunches for all three of us.

After we woke up, Asuka looked a little surprised to see a clone of me finishing breakfast. Seeing two more reading on the couch made her scowl. I carefully kept my distance as she ate. Bracing myself, I ordered the two clones to disperse themselves, one at a time.

The result was an instant headache as information began to flood my brain. I was glad we'd gotten up a little early as I nearly threw up

before they were done. I'm also glad I'd done that before I'd eaten my own breakfast. I sort of collapsed onto the couch, eyes screwed shut, and began doing a deep breathing exercise Old Man had taught me for centering myself. The pain quickly ebbed to a dull ache. I opened my eyes when I felt a touch on my shoulder.

Asuka handed me a cup of green tea. I accepted it gratefully, hoping it would settle my stomach. "I'll be okay in a moment," I murmured. "I had the clones read all night. When they poofed, I got the information, but I didn't think it would hurt this much. I'd better warn Naruto to be careful if he tries this."

"You better be careful yourself," Asuka said in a low voice. Her eyes bored into mine and I nodded meekly. I was in no shape for a prolonged argument. "At least I think I know how we can fix the cameras now. Most of them probably have condensation formed in the power supply. Some of those probably had a voltage surge as they failed, which means we need to test the circuit boards as well."

"I don't care about the stupid cameras," she pouted.

"Neither do I," I countered, "but I also don't want psycho-sensei on our cases if we don't make some progress with them." Actually, in some ways, working on the advanced gear was fun – there were elements of electrical engineering that I could now see bore some resemblance to seal design. Circuit designs had their own parallels in chakra circulations, similarly how capacitors acted like chakra accumulators.

On the other hand, I didn't think Asuka wanted to hear any of my new insights at that moment. She didn't have to remind me that I and Naruto were all the family she had left, and she had grown up in a large family – even if they had been lying to her and manipulating her. She was used to having people around that she cared about, and she was clearly apprehensive about anything that might take one of us away from her.

After a couple of minutes, my stomach settled down and I was able to eat my breakfast. Naruto was the last to wake up and fell on his portion like a starving wolf. He promised to clean up the dishes as we left, smiling as he looked at the bento we'd left for him to take with him.

After my experiences that morning, I was understandably cautious about using Kage Bunshin to help with the repairs. However, a little experimentation showed that the disorientation and pain were directly proportional to how much new information was carried with the dispersed clone's memories. Doing simple, repetitive tasks that I already knew how to perform was relatively painless.

By lunch, I had five clones working on disassembled cameras, spreading the tools as far as they would go, while I sat down personally with Asuka and explained what I'd learned about how to diagnose dead surveillance cameras.

She pretty much insisted on only talking to "the real me" and not any of the clones. I just shrugged that off. I had little doubt she'd be willing to use a minor fire jutsu on me to see if I dispersed if I tried to pull a fast one.

When Anko checked in on us that afternoon, I actually got a raised eyebrow. There were fourteen shiny, good-as-new cameras stacked on the table next to the door. The rest of them were in various stages of assembly.

She walked up to one of my clones and gently poked it's shoulder. It looked up at her, putting down the soldering iron. "Kage Bunshin?" she asked and the clone nodded. She looked over at me working with Asuka and smirked, murmuring "gang-"something under her breath.

I was actually kind of glad I couldn't hear her.

"Okay," she said. "Maybe you don't completely suck after all. Finish these up before you leave and we'll go install them tomorrow. I wonder how you brats will like my playground."

That night, I decided to try something a little different. I carefully laid out supplies of paper and blood-laced ink, and set a pair of clones to making explosive tags while I slept. I wasn't even fully asleep before both of them dispersed themselves completing the first set of tags.

I groaned and got up again. Asuka grumbled a little, but didn't wake up. I'd forgotten exactly how much chakra I was putting into those tags before I primed them. I concentrated as I molded chakra, pouring more and more energy into the jutsu before I released it. It was even harder making sure that energy only poured into a pair of clones, as opposed to a couple hundred. I'd originally thought Naruto was exaggerating when he told us about that bastard Mizuki, but now I realized he wasn't. You really could make hundreds of clones if you had the chakra.

I sent the two super-charged clones into the kitchen, and then collapsed back onto the bed. Despite my reserves, and how I could already feel them replenishing, I wasn't going to have any trouble sleeping.

I awoke to two pleasant surprises. The kitchen contained a neat stack of tags, along with an already prepared breakfast. I hadn't specifically ordered my clones to do the latter, but the last clone didn't have enough energy to charge another explosive tag, so he took it upon himself to make tamagoyaki for everyone.

Now, the tags were not a surprise. The clone exercising initiative was. The second surprise was the lack of pain when he dispersed with a jaunty wave. Of course, the only new information his memories brought was the recipe for the rolled omelets he'd looked up in Iruka's cookbook. That, and his amusement when he realized that *I* didn't realize my clones already knew what I wanted them to do

when they were created. If they were clones of me, then they also had *my* memories…

I grinned sheepishly as I ate my portion and fired up the stove while my roommates began to stir. Naruto had made a point of carefully rinsing out his bento when he returned from his mission with Team 7. I began boiling water for some udon noodles that would be tasty cold with a sesame sauce. It wasn't ramen, but it was close enough that I figured he'd appreciate it.

Anko actually nodded approvingly when she surveyed the fully reassembled cameras sitting on the workbenches. She picked one and hooked it up to the test leads, nodding at the green lights.

"All right," she said, "now that you've finally got these fixed, we need to place them." She dropped a couple of large canvas duffel bags at our feet. "Pack these up with some of that bubble-wrap. I've got a map of the surveillance points where we need to hook these up."

As we hurriedly packed up the unfortunately sensitive gear, she pulled a square of laminated paper out of her trench coat. "These cameras really aren't meant to keep track of everything that goes on in the Forest of Death. What they are meant to do is give us warning if there is an unauthorized entry. After that fiasco in Kumo three years ago, no one wants to take any chances."

"Er, what happened in Kumo?" I asked.

Anko gave a nasty smile. "A missing-nin infiltrated the outdoor training area where they were conducting part of their chuunin examination. Killed off the entire roster of examinees and slipped out before anyone knew he was there."

I almost dropped the camera I was holding.

"No one knows if it was a personal grudge or if he'd been paid to whack someone in particular and got carried away," Anko continued.

"But they know it had to be a missing-nin. No kage would be stupid enough to approve such a mission. It'd be an instant war if the assassin was captured. Still, people have their suspicions, and might lash out at anyone handy. I'm going to have most of ANBU standing by in case we detect an intrusion."

"Oh great," I muttered. "Attack of the Killer Mimes."

I hadn't intended to be heard, but Anko's ears were a little sharper than I realized. She actually cracked up, laughing a lot harder than a little snarking warranted. "I can't wait to run that one by Kakashi," she finally said.

"You know Naruto-sama's sensei?" Asuka asked innocently.

"Yeah, he used to be the ANBU commander," she said. "And what's with this 'sama' business anyway? That's the brat that vandalized the Hokage monument."

"And led half the ninja of the village on a wild goose chase, from what I heard," I replied. "I suppose that's one way to get people to train you."

Asuka gave Anko her most wide-eyed and innocent look. "Surely you know our full names, Anko-, er, Anko-sempai." She'd almost slipped and used the forbidden term, but the other honorific was allowed.

Anko frowned. Then she reached into a trench coat pocket and pulled out a sheaf of papers and a scroll. The latter was looking slightly scorched. I smiled. Score one for Asuka. Unrolling the scroll, Anko read downward, then paused. She looked up at both of us. Then back down at the scroll. And then back up.

"Uzumaki?" she asked.

"Yes," we both said in unison. I couldn't have planned this better if I'd tried.

"You aren't related to him?" she asked hesitantly.

"We are now," I answered. "We already filed the paperwork when we received our licenses. Konoha now officially has an Uzumaki clan."

"Now I know Sarutobi has definitely gone senile," Anko muttered. "You both know about…"

"Of course," I answered. "Birds of a feather and all that. And I think Hokage-sama sort of approves of us associating with him. After all, no one else will." Those last words came out a little harder than I realized.

Anko winced a little, but just nodded. "All right, let's get going. Daylight is wasting."

It should have been obvious to me ahead of time, but Asuka and I both had a rather large gap in our shared skills and knowledge. I was raised in an underground prison cell, and Asuka was in her gilded cage built of lies.

Neither of us had an ounce of woods lore.

My chakra control was good enough to walk up trees, but I still tended to overestimate the strength of branches, sometimes with disastrous results. Asuka's chakra control wasn't quite as good – as far as I knew, tree walking or wall walking wasn't even covered at the Academy.

Both of us made far too much noise when moving through the underbrush. It was little wonder the ANBU had ambushed us so easily after we crossed the border.

Surprisingly, Anko didn't blow up at us. What she did do was teach us how to move efficiently through heavy woods and underbrush. Of course, her methods of correction often involved thrown kunai. But,

she never seemed to aim at vital points, and never actually drew any of Asuka's blood, so I managed to contain myself.

We only got two cameras placed that day, but she seemed… satisfied… with our progress, which surprised me.

The next day progressed a little faster as we started to move more naturally. We no longer 'sounded like a herd of oxen' and remounted eight cameras. As we moved through the various terrains of training ground forty-four, Anko pointed out various edible plants and animals, as well as ones that could be used to distill deadly poisons. After she insisted we try various grubs and beetles that could be used as protein sources, I decided to place 'bottle of soy sauce' at the top of my supplies list for survival training.

I also discovered that normal (at least non-summoned) snakes simply *would not* bite me. At all. In fact, they tended to run away as fast as they could slither. Anko seemed rather miffed about that – I think she was planning something sadistic for later. Asuka, on the other hand, was rather happy about that discovery.

Unfortunately, she expressed this in words loud enough for Anko to hear.

"Why does that mean *you* don't need to worry about snakes?" Anko asked curiously.

"Well, I mean I don't need to worry about snakes sneaking up on me while I'm sleeping," Asuka said in a small voice.

Anko's eyes narrowed and I was volunteered to go remount the next camera by myself. At the top of a really tall tree that overlooked one of the gates. While she and Asuka stayed below.

I couldn't hear the conversation that occurred in my absence, but from the hard looks I received from Anko as I descended, I knew better than to ask. Coincidentally, I ended up remounting the next three cameras with a quiet murmur of voices echoing up from below.

Fortunately, I think Asuka was able to make the Special Jonin understand, because the glares I received were a little less angry each time I descended and Asuka looked a little less anxious each time as well.

The final bit of survival training that day consisted of dealing with a tiger roughly the size of a house that had decided the tree with our camera mount was in it's territory. I was feeling a little irritable from the judgmental looks I'd been getting all day, so when Anko drawled for me to 'deal with it' I wasn't feeling like playing nice with the kitty. As the tiger stalked toward us, I dipped into my pouch for a kunai and wire, and slipped a roll of explosive tags out of my tunic.

"Wait a second," Anko ordered as I selected a slightly larger than medium tag that would have reduced the feline to a stench of burnt fur. She made an obscure hand-sign that made the (obviously) trained tiger back away and turned toward me. "Where the hell did you get all those?" she asked.

"All what?" I asked stupidly.

"The explosives," she said poking my tunic where I'd tucked the rest of the tags away. "Those things are expensive. How the hell can you afford...?"

I shrugged. "Expensive? Paper and ink are cheap as hell."

She snorted. "Ah. Good bluff brat, I actually thought those were real. I don't think that would work on a wild tiger though. Who told you the ones in here were trained?" Her dark eyes glittered, clearly anticipating gutting whoever gave up one of her patented Genin-Terrorizing Secrets™.

I sighed as I wired the tag to the kunai and primed it. "No one," I said as I carelessly tossed it behind me. There was at least 30 yards of clear area for it to land in. Anko twitched as the explosion shook the ground and knocked leaves loose from the trees around us.

"Maybe you don't miss," I said, "But I don't bluff."

I was in a rather surly mood as we walked home. Anko hadn't let us go until I'd explained exactly why I knew how to make explosive tags. Her face was unreadable as she dismissed us, but I knew she was no doubt looking for ways to exploit what she'd learned.

Asuka didn't say much, just eyeing me occasionally as I kicked at a loose paving stone or bit of trash.

When he got home, she just sat at the kitchen table and watched me bang the cooking pots around with a lot more force than was strictly necessary. "Do you want to talk about why you are so grumpy," she finally asked I started boiling water for tea.

"Not much to talk about, aside from my undying hate for our sensei-but-don't-call-her-that-or-she'll-stab-you," I said sourly.

"She isn't that bad," Asuka insisted.

"Maybe you think that because she *wasn't* glaring at you all day and making you do all the climbing because she mad at you for something you didn't do," I snapped.

Asuka looked down. "I'm sorry I said anything about the snakes," she said after a moment. "I, er, had to explain that you weren't, um, taking advantage of me or anything." Her face became redder and redder as she spoke. "She seemed really concerned about that." She paused. "I think someone hurt her really badly when she was a genin, or even younger."

I raised an eyebrow. "When did you become a mind-reader?" I asked.

"I didn't," Asuka answered. "But look at the way she jumped to conclusions from what I said. It's almost like she's expecting it to happen. And I really had to convince her there wasn't anything bad

happening. You just, well, keep me from having nightmares and burning everything up."

"And none of it is any of her damn business," I concluded.

"Not if she really is our sensei, or leader, or whatever," Asuka reminded me. "Maybe no one helped her when she needed it, maybe for the same reasons, so she is determined not to be that way."

"Well, I'm still sick of being the whipping boy for her traumas," I said truculently. I really hated the whiny way that came out.

"And you should be," Asuka agreed. "It isn't in any way fair that you are bearing the brunt of this. It isn't fair that you were saddled with me and my weakness, and…"

The kitchen table jarred as I brought the palm of my hand down on it. "Stop it," I commanded. "Stop it right there. You are not weak and you are not a burden. You got that?"

"But Anko-"

"But Anko nothing," I insisted. "My problems with her are between me and her. If it wasn't this, it would be something else for her to go off on me about. She's hated me in varying degrees pretty much since she first laid eyes on me. I'm pretty sure she was a student of this Orochimaru jerk, since she uses snake summons and I read that he was the holder of the contract for snakes. If he screwed her over before or when he left, my face is an unwelcome reminder of him."

"That's not fair!" Asuka shrilled.

"Life isn't fair, Asuka-chan," I shot back. I made an effort to calm myself. There was nothing to be gained by upsetting her. It's not like it was her fault. "No one said it has to be fair, we just have to deal with it."

"Well that sucks!" she all but shouted.

"Could be worse," I insisted. "We could still be in Iwakagure."

I wanted to bite my tongue out as soon as the words left my big, fat mouth. Asuka reddened, and then went very still. I hadn't meant to remind her of things that happened to both us before we escaped, but it still happened.

"I suppose you are right," she said. The mechanical tone she adopted made me want to throw up. I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed as hard as I could without pulling her off her feet. She let out a noise that was somewhere between a squeak and a wheeze. I eased back the pressure a little bit.

I wasn't going to try to say anything else. My mouth had gotten me into enough trouble already.

Asuka was quiet that evening, but we managed to keep things peaceful. Naruto's arrival put a welcome buffer between us. Some of the wounds were just a little too raw to be examined right now. He jabbered on about the mission his team had performed that day, and slowly the tension in the room dissipated.

I was so grateful for the respite that I was more than happy to present him with a large stack of explosive tags my clones had produced.

My clan leader went all starry-eyed, staring at the tags in his hands. "Best. Room-mate. Ever!" He finally said after a moment.

"Humph!" Asuka groused. "Get used to wearing something besides orange!" she warned.

"Ah! Asuka-chan!" Naruto cried, (carefully) putting down his tags and rushing over to the red-headed girl. He swept her up into a hug and

started dancing around the room with her. "I like you too! But you won't help me blow up Sasuke!"

She began beating on his back with her fists, but was hampered by gales of laughter. When he finally put her down, she was so dizzy she couldn't sit up straight and her face was beet red.

"Seriously," Naruto said, "you two are the best. I just wish I'd known you all my life." He frowned a little as he said that. Was there some disease going around that made us all say stupid crap today?

I sighed. "Well, if we can't change the past, we can sure as hell change the future. Right?" They nodded. "And I think in the future the Uzumaki Clan is going to be kicking ass and taking names. Right?"

Asuka nodded, and Naruto jumped up and struck a pose that looked like something from one of his manga. "Believe it!" he shouted.

I could barely contain myself. No telling how he'd take it if I broke down laughing. "All right, let's head out!" I announced instead, striking my own pose, pointing dramatically at the door.

"Out?" Naruto asked.

"We're going to Ichiraku's to celebrate!" I explained.

"Celebrate what?" Asuka asked, frowning in obvious confusion.

"We're celebrating 'Didn't Suck Day'," I said. "Nothing really horrible happened to any of us, and I think that's worth celebrating, right?"

Naruto was, of course, in favor of anything involving ramen, and Asuka didn't stand a chance against both of us in high spirits. As the head cook, I might have been offended at his preference for Teuchi's cooking to mine, but I'd already realized that the food was only part of Ichiraku's attraction for my friend. The cook and his daughter were both on the short list of people that treated Naruto like a person.

Going to eat at Ichiraku's was as close as he came to being a normal person in many ways. Having a place he could go to and not be shunned or treated horribly? Hell, that must have been more precious than gold.

Asuka and I, of course, treated him with respect. But we were also fellow Jinchuuriki - we couldn't deny his humanity without denying our own. Teuchi and Ayame seemed to represent his hopes that the rest of the villagers would one day come to see him differently – just as Iruka and the Hokage showed that shinobi could rise above their prejudices as well.

Besides, Teuchi could really make some awesome noodles.

The next day, some of the tension seemed to have eased a bit between Anko and us. Now it alternated between Asuka and myself when it was time to scamper up a tree. While we waited, Anko seemed to be idly passing the time asking innocuous questions.

Of course, the idea of Mitarashi Anko doing anything innocently seemed utterly preposterous.

I could sort of see where this was all going, so by the third tree I just gave up and recited a condensed version of my history, much like the one I'd given the Hokage. Oddly enough, she gave a visible flinch the first time I mentioned my training in sealing techniques. I knew there was a story behind that, but I doubted I'd find out any time soon.

By afternoon, we'd finished with the cameras and she brought us to a large tower complex that lay in the exact center of the circular training area. It wasn't used very often and it was very dusty. Our job was to correct that condition, she informed us with a smirk. I made a face and then asked her where the cleaning supplies were stored.

After she explained that the janitorial closets were located next to the stairwell on each floor, I carefully molded a large amount of chakra.

"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu," I said, watching her face as sixty clones poofed into existence around us.

I just wish I'd thought to bring a camera.

I went home that night with a slight headache, accompanied by a thorough knowledge of the tower's layout. It was all worth it as far as I was concerned. The look on Anko's face had been priceless. I don't think she imagined I had anywhere near enough chakra to make *that* many clones. Heh. Especially not enough clones to get all of the clean-up done that afternoon.

On the other hand, she seemed inordinately happy to be off to her dango shops.

She gave us the next day off, since we'd basically completed two weeks of scheduled preparations in a little over four days. She said she'd need at least a day to find something for us to do. I almost thought she said some *one* , but I must have misheard that.

We'd also received a hefty little bonus, since the money was already budgeted *by task* , based on how long it normally took the work crews to get things done. Based on the sizes of our vouchers, they must have either been lazy as hell or had a really sweet contract.

As it was, Asuka decided that meant we really needed to shop on our day off. We could both use some spare working clothes and various sundries we'd skipped on our earlier budget-conscious purchasing.

Just the thought of visiting the paper store had me willing to agree to anything else she suggested.

I resolutely refrained from clearing out the scrolls and ink, doing little more than replacing what I'd already used to make stacks of tags.

I also felt pretty clever about leaving a clone in the apartment. Every time we accumulated a few bags of purchases, I created a clone to take it back to the apartment, where the clone I left behind let it in. I wasn't sure if cloned apartment keys would work, and I didn't want to take any chances with my paper.

I was also starting to see why Naruto used Kage Bunshin so much. If I'd been forced to carry all those bags around as we crossed and re-crossed the village, I'm sure I would have enjoyed the experience a lot less.

Toward the end of the afternoon, we ran into Team 7 as they returned from their mission. After hearing them talk about Tora, the cat belonging to the Fire Daimyo's wife, I'm amazed no one had 'accidentally' killed it yet.

When their sensei reminded them that they needed to report back to the Hokage, we decided to follow them to the Hokage's Tower to continue the conversation. Naruto talked about other missions they'd been on, though his recollections seemed to differ a little from Sakura's.

The Uchiha, of course, couldn't be bothered to participate in the conversation. Of course, I should be grateful to the sulking Sasuke. Anytime someone complained that three people wasn't enough to be a real clan, I could point at him and ask if that meant there really wasn't an Uchiha Clan anymore. I was already looking forward to that.

Naruto asked if he could be dismissed after they reported in so he could go with us, which seemed to shock Sakura more than a little. Kakashi nodded, so we hung around the front entrance until he emerged a few minutes later.

"Sakura seemed a little surprised you wanted to hang out with us," I observed as we left.

"Well, I guess she was expecting me to ask her out like I always do," Naruto said, scratching the back of his head nervously.

"You shouldn't keep asking her if she says no," Asuka said in serious tone. "It's not like she's suddenly going to change her mind if you keep asking."

"I guess," Naruto said, visibly deflating. "I just… well… she's so…"

I remembered what Asuka and I had discussed about finding someone more appropriate for our friend. "She's so hung up on Sasuke that you're just wasting your time," I added bluntly.

Naruto winced and I abruptly felt like a jerk.

"You can't expect someone to *like* you just because you like them," Asuka added, giving me a glare. "Not in that way."

"From what you've said," I ventured, "she also doesn't treat you very well, either. You *deserve* someone better."

Naruto opened his mouth, but wonder of wonders, slowly closed it instead of speaking. "I do?" he finally asked in a small voice.

"Yes, you do," Asuka reassured him. "You just need to find the right person."

Naruto looked oddly thoughtful as we made our way back to the commercial sector. On that note, I decided to make a little change in our itinerary.

Konoha's largest sumi-nin workshop was housed in an ornate building in the oldest section of the commercial quarter. The entire block was quiet, no doubt to aid the concentration of whoever was wielding the brushes inside. The exterior gate opened onto a small atrium garden with a koi pond.

Now I knew why tags were so expensive. This was big business in Konoha.

I took in a deep breath, and tried to let the burble of running water from the fountain sooth my mind as I collected my thoughts. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Asuka smile. They probably had something similar in the Tsuchikage's residence. Naruto looked a little uncomfortable as he fidgeted.

We made our way slowly along the clearly marked path to an old-style vestibule where we removed our sandals. I hadn't seen wood and rice-paper construction up close like this before. My eyes also picked up tiny seals placed at the corners of the panels. I could see silencing as well as strengthening patterns. The fragile-seeming walls might well be as strong as cinder blocks.

A young woman in a formal kimono appeared and asked our business. Her eyes widened when I asked to speak to the seal-master, but she merely bowed and backed out of the room, gesturing for us to be seated.

She returned after a moment and informed us that I would be allowed a brief audience. Refreshments would be provided for my companions while they waited. I rose to my feet as gracefully as I could manage and gave a short bow.

The head tag-maker was a slightly rotund man in his late fifties with a few wisps of white hair framing his balding head. As I expected, he was dressed in a rich silk yukata of a very traditional cut. I was starting to realize why the commercially available tags were so expensive.

It also rankled, just a little. I understood on a factual level why. The knowledge to create them was pretty specialized, and only people able to mold a fair amount of chakra could actually charge them. That meant the actual pool of possible creators would be fairly small. Academy dropouts would not have the chakra control or even the reserves to do very much. Very few people with the right training

survived to be retired from active duty, but it seemed that those who did and retained the ability to use chakra could find fairly lucrative employment.

But I also suspected a fair bit of collusion was going on. Even if the man before me could only create a handful of tags in a day, it hardly justified the prices Iruka had quoted to me. Shinobi undertaking dangerous missions could afford them, but it was a substantial operating expense. That meant Konoha shinobi would be hesitant to use them, perhaps limiting their effectiveness. I couldn't detect any signs of collusion between the foundries producing shuriken and kunai, but I supposed any blacksmith could undercut them in if the prices rose too high.

Worse, if this man was a retired shinobi, as the battered and scuffed forehead protector tied to his sash suggested, then he *knew* what the high price of tags meant for active duty ninja – and he was still willing to profit from it.

On the other hand, who was I to judge this situation? The Hokage was obviously willing to let this situation persist, so it couldn't be too bad. Asuka and I had come to Konoha to find a new home, not pick fights with everyone we met. It also wouldn't do to make more trouble for Naruto either. There may also be other factors that I wasn't aware of, so I shouldn't be too quick to judge.

Nonetheless, I was a little uneasy as I introduced myself to Masamichi Okuda. He was a little dubious about my claims to be a fellow seal master, but that changed as I graciously answered almost every question he posed to me. His gaze grew increasing shrewd as his questions grew more and more obscure. Finally, he asked me to demonstrate one of my techniques.

Whether I liked him or not, Okuda-san had some *really* nice equipment. The brush I used was as soft as a morning breeze, with just enough resilience to make the kanji crisp. I shuddered to think of how much it must have cost.

He looked surprised when I used my own blood to prime the ink. I think that must have been a regional variation peculiar to Earth Country. He mentioned that they used trace amounts of special minerals to make their ink retain chakra better. I wondered briefly if that was why their tags were so expensive, and if his employees were all going have sore thumbs soon.

When I finished charging the medium-sized tag and presented it to him, Okuda-san peered at me more closely than the tag. It took me a moment to realize that he was looking for signs of chakra exhaustion. I smiled modestly.

"So," he said carefully. "How many tags can you produce on a normal basis?"

I shrugged. "On a good night, perhaps eighty."

His mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. I enjoyed the sight far more than I should have. "Of this size?" He asked after a moment.

"At least," I replied. "I've also been experimenting with some larger designs for structural demolition." I didn't tell him I planned to call it the Uzumaki Special. I'd also neglected to mention my last name when I introduced myself. Given what he knew of my background, such an omission wouldn't seem unusual. Yet.

I wasn't the only person in the room being tested.

That's when Masamichi began to speak about market conditions and how it was important not to oversaturate it. It was important that people not start undervaluing what they did for Konoha. He waxed rhapsodic about the dangers if explosive tags became too inexpensive, how younger shinobi might become profligate in their use, or worse, come to see them as toys and misuse them, often with tragic results!

Yeah, they were definitely holding back production to keep the prices high. And that also meant they were colluding with all the other tag-makers to keep the prices inflated – otherwise, someone not part of their agreement would make more tags and drop the prices.

It's nice to see my utter lack of faith in humanity justified.

We were dancing around making some sort of agreement when we heard a disturbance from the direction of the atrium. Okuda was pressing me to make some sort of exclusive binding contract to produce for his business and his business only, and I was playing the wide-eyed innocent. It was almost amusing to hear him try to describe what he wanted without actually admitting that they were creating an artificial shortage to keep the prices high.

Still, the sound of raised voices brought with them a sense of relief. I was getting tired of all the subterfuge. I murmured an apology to my host for the manners of my companions as I rose from the tatami and made my way to the door.

Okuda told me to think nothing of it. I could also hear the frustration in his voice. He *really* wanted to pin me down to an agreement before I walked out his door. Nonetheless, good manners compelled him to follow me as I made my way back to the entrance.

Inside the atrium, it was pandemonium. Asuka and Naruto were both standing in their bare feet. The young woman was standing off to the side, beside a tea service that was scattered on the floor next to an overturned tray. Beside the other entrance into the depths of the building stood a middle-aged woman in a brocade-covered kimono, accompanied by two hulking retainers.

The two bookends took a threatening step towards my clan members and I felt my chakra spike. Hard. "What is the meaning of this?" I snapped, using Old Man's harshest tone. Logically, I knew that two untrained or poorly-trained civilians were no threat to even a pair of rookie genin, but logic had nothing to do with me at that moment.

The room went utterly silent, and I wondered if I'd finally managed to do that 'killing intent' thingy Old Man had told me about.

Whatever it was, Asuka shook it off first. "Hikaru-san," she began with a short bow, "we were waiting here for you when this… woman entered the room and began shouting demands that we leave."

"Is this true?" I asked quietly. The retainers' eyes looked everywhere but at me. The older woman had no such compunctions. "I will not have that… thing… in this place!" she shrilled.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Naruto seem to shrink in on himself before he tightened his jaw and stood up straight again. Good. "And why is that?" I asked in a casual tone.

"Because he's-"

"Midori!" Masamichi snapped. "Wife, that is enough! Do you wish to be executed?"

I glanced at the retainers. They were well over thirty, and the looks they did direct toward Naruto were hateful. The younger woman fled the room at a gesture by Okuda.

"I think everyone in this room is aware of the Hokage's secret law," I said carefully. The men nodded, but this Midori harpy took that as permission to resume her attack.

"Good! Then you'll understand why I don't want that demon in my home!"

I gave her my most contemptuous look. "For the wife of an *alleged* seal-master, you remain remarkably ignorant of the art. He's no more of a demon than you are. Furthermore," I continued, turning toward Okuda, "you have insulted the head of my clan. I hope you will understand why there can be no accord between us now."

"Clan?" he asked, frowning.

"My full name is Uzumaki Hikaru. My companions are Uzumaki Asuka and you of course know Uzumaki Naruto," I explained coldly as I stalked toward the portly man. "We are all active-duty shinobi. Nonetheless, I will find the time to make as many tags as I can. I will take great pleasure in undercutting your prices until you *bleed* . Enjoy your fine house and unearned wealth, *parasite.* See how long that shrilling harpy stays with you after both are gone."

With that, I turned and stalked toward the exit, holding the door open so Naruto could leave first.